



Eyes Wide Shut in Berlin

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Through a nicely mounted series of photos, newspaper clippings and a rarely seen video exposition, the American Jazz Museum hosts *The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936*, an exhibition sponsored by the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, Overland Park, KS and organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. Like the games, this is a traveling event that should be seen in whatever city it visits.

What appears on the surface to be a pretty straightforward celebration becomes a multi-dimensional conundrum in 1936 when Berlin hosted the games of the XI Olympiad. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the games to Berlin in 1931 over Barcelona; two years later Adolph Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany and put the aspect of politics over sportsmanship into question. It was years of debating between the internationally placed members of the IOC on the expanding politically maelstrom that would threaten to overpower the Games. Hitler immediately developed a reputation for saying one thing and doing another, so it was necessary to keep a watchful eye on preparation for the events and the participating athletes. IOC members visited Germany and met with Hitler acolyte Josef Goebbels, and soon after, even *der Fuhrer* was hoping for some form of appeasement concerning the rights of all athletes, specifically the Jewish participants. Although the Olympics might stand for sportsmanship, in a keenly political move, the IOC voted to expel American IOC President Ernest Lee Jahnke, the son of a German immigrant, for encouraging athletes to boycott the games. He was soon replaced by United States Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage, who supported the games under any conditions. Between Brundage and the duped IOC visitors, the games opened without conflict.

Brundage was also an Olympian, having participated in the 1912 Stockholm games. Although he was not pro-Hitler, he held nothing against the Reich. He was perfectly capable of turning a blind eye for the sake of the games. Brundage's belief in the higher, nobler goals of the Olympics themselves became a stand many politicians shared. Brundage visited Berlin prior to the 1934 Summer Olympic Games and was warmly welcomed. He also saw nothing untoward in treatment of its citizens or its athletes. The games would move forward.

The 1919 Treaty of Versailles effectively told Germany and the world that they had lost the Great War and that they were officially held in scorn. Germany experienced a depression much worse than the rest of Europe and was ripe for the rise of Adolph Hitler. His ascension was the greatest opportunity for propaganda in Germany as every step was taken to show the world how Germany would rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Chief architect Albert Speer designed stadiums to rival all previous sites, and the games were the first to have live television coverage. Using equipment from Telefunken and Fernseh, the German Post Office broadcast over 70 hours of coverage to special viewing rooms throughout Berlin and Potsdam. Hitler hoped to be remembered for these powerful symbols of influence. (The impact of television, which remains a viable tool for propaganda, clearly resonated with visitors of this installation.)

Left: Official poster for the 1936 Olympic Games shows an Olympian rising above Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, tying the "Aryan race" to the classical ideas of Western Civilization. Photo courtesy of John Loaring, USHMM Photo Archives

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With the IOC closely observing the culmination of the games, it was determined that there would have to be concessions made to accommodate the various races that made up the worldwide potpourri of athletes. Although German Jews were not allowed to join sports clubs in their homeland, they were culled from natives already living abroad from as far away as California. One such example was fencer Helene Mayer, who was one of several Jewish athletes training overseas in Mills College outside San Francisco. With the Germans determined to obfuscate any wrongdoing on their part regarding the acceptance of Jewish athletes onto the German teams, many concessions were made to ensure an athlete as fine as Mayer dutifully returned to participate. Finally, an *invitation* to participate was sent to Mayer. On the surface, this appeared right and good, but it was also known that Mayer's parents and siblings still lived in Germany and the underlying consequences were such that her declining this *generous* invitation could cause problems for her family. (It was obviously not above the Reich to result to strong-arming to get what they wanted.) For Hitler's Germany, race was everything and he intended to stock his pantry with the finest athletes available, Jewish or not.

The stories of Hitler in the press were a mixed bag at first when it concerned the games. American journalist William Shirer, covering the Winter Olympic Games in 1934, was often poorly treated by the Germans after a scathing article outing the true nature and emotional landscape of the Reich. He was one of several journalists who made sure to show every pock and scar of Hitler and his regime of mistrust. Yes, most of the "No Jews Allowed" signs were removed from café and hotel windows, but not all. A few managed to remain in place, a sign that perhaps a subverted message was still trying to be sent, however obliquely. The games later received their due, and Hitler was not as chewed up as he could have been. It was an effort on behalf of politicians around the world to steadfastly ignore what was happening under their noses, either for the sake of appeasement, non-involvement or simple ignorance. Hitler hosted his Games and they were, for the most part, covered with reverence.

An often repeated lie-turned-myth by the media regarding Hitler and Jesse Owens was that Hitler "snubbed" Owens and his achievements. Owens has said, "When I passed Hitler he arose, waved his hand at me, and I waved back at him. I think the writers showed bad taste in criticizing the man of the hour in Germany." He went further to state that Roosevelt was the one who actually "snubbed" him, not Hitler. Although it should be pointed out that Owens still had a greater chance of being lynched at home in a pre-Civil-Rights-Movement America. As reported by the *Philadelphia Tribune* on December 19, 1935, "The AAU shouts against the cruelties of other nations and the brutalities in foreign climates, but conveniently forgets the things that sit on its own doorstep." Owens left Germany unscathed with gold medals around his neck, knowing he faced a far greater risk of harm in his own homeland. •

Right: Mack Robinson, older brother of Jackie Robinson, won the silver medal in the 200-meter sprint, just a fraction of a second behind Jesse Owens. Photo courtesy of Mack and Delano Robinson. USHMM Photo Archives

