Chasing My Grandfather’s Shadow: The Transformation of Geza Feldman and the Role of Physical Activity in the Life of George Field

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Every immigrant who landed at Pier 21 has two stories: the story they came from and the story they started when they landed in Canada.
—Rosalie Abella, Justice of the Court of Appeal for Ontario

The Halifax Herald noted that 12 April—Easter Sunday—1925 was a cloudy day. At Canada’s largest Atlantic seaport, few Haligonians likely noticed the docking of the Cunard liner Andania. To a boatload of passengers, the cool, windswept jetty of Pier 2 was Canada’s Ellis Island. There was no fanfare upon their arrival, however, no Statue of Liberty in the harbor welcoming them. In reality, the nine-day journey from Southampton, England, and Cherbourg, France, for the ship’s 322 third-class passengers—most of them immigrants from eastern Europe—had been memorable for cramped, unhealthy quarters and rough seas.

Before the Andania set sail from Cherbourg on 3 April 1925, Cunard officials registered the boarding of a 33-year-old Hungarian. His name was Geza Feldman. Six years later the same man obtained a Canadian certificate of naturalization that listed his name as George Geza Feldman. The certificate noted that the man, from a small farming village in northeastern Hungary, was a gardener in the town of Brampton, Ontario, northwest of Toronto. Less than three years later, the 1934 City of Toronto directory listed the man as George G. Field, owner of a small grocery store. The transformation from Geza Feldman, Hungarian immigrant, to George Field, Canadian grocer, was complete.

Regardless of the name—George or Geza, Field or Feldman—the man was my paternal grandfather. He died when I was two years old and, for reasons that will become clear, shared only limited details of his life with his son, my father. This is his story. Or, to be more accurate, what follows are the details of his life as I have been able to uncover them. The choices of which events to highlight are mine. The analysis is mine. The voice is mine. The desire to (re)construct this story and to imbue it with meaning is mine, and mine alone.

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Although the few surviving photographs suggest that I knew my grandfather, and as a toddler was comfortable in his presence, I did not have a relationship with him. Today I know my grandfather as Geza (although for the last 35 years of his life his contemporaries called him George), not Grandpa or some other affectionate term. Assembling his story has long been important to me, no doubt because it offers me the chance to frame my own. It is an attempt, in part, to understand the role that sport—frequently as a fan, regularly but less often as a participant—has played in my life, when it was so absent in Geza’s.

This story is the culmination of a journey that has taken me to Hungary, Ukraine, Austria, Germany, and Poland; to archives in Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Washington, and Vienna; and from the small village where my grandfather was born to the Budapest neighborhood where he lived. Chasing my grandfather’s shadow was much like opening a Russian matryoshka doll, only to reveal a series of dolls inside: one is the context within which my grandfather lived, both in Hungary and in Canada, which shaped the attitudes and beliefs that informed his identity choices; another contains the dimensions of the identity that my grandfather adopted; and a third represents the role that sport and physical activity played in shaping his identity (this last doll, as will become clear, is rather small). Somewhere inside all of these dolls is one that represents my grandfather as he was—his essence—though I make no claim to having uncovered that doll. The narrative moves between my grandfather’s story and an analysis of these broader issues of context, ethnic identity formation, and sport’s role in individual identity, disclosing more about my grandfather as each of the dolls that comprise his identity are revealed.

My grandfather’s transformation—from Geza Feldman to George Field—was not just a change in identification, but the reshaping of an identity. Geza left Hungary as a Jew born in a rural village and educated in Budapest. Once in Canada he continued his urban existence, but his experiences with anti-Semitism convinced him that rather than seeking ties with expatriate Jewish communities, he had to make a break with the past. This article examines one man’s choices concerning ethnicity and identity, and explores the impact these choices had on subsequent generations. While they are inextricably linked to the man who made them and to the social and material conditions in which he lived, these choices also have a larger significance. A narrative of sport and physical activity (or, in fact, an account of the relative absence of recreational physical activity or sport in Geza’s life) acts here as a case study of the process of acculturation both encountered by, and shaped by, one early-twentieth-century eastern European Jewish immigrant to Canada. The choice to privilege this particular narrative is due, in large measure, to the fact that sport and physical activity are significantly more important to my own sense of self than they were for my grandfather and his identity. This attempt to understand my grandfather’s identity is thus motivated by a desire to explain my own identity choices as a scholar studying the history of sport and physical activity.

There are myriad ways in which Geza’s struggle to discard his Jewishness played itself out. The role of sport and physical activity in his life was a microcosm of his attempts to exercise his individual agency within personal and societal constraints. Geza’s sporting experience, however, was largely nonexistent. He was neither participant nor fan. This is not to say that physical activity, and debates about its merits, did not play a role in his life. Rather, examinations of the immigrant sporting experience often fail to account for the willing nonparticipant, such as