Fencing at Crossed Swords: Immigration of Elitist Sport to Palestine

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Jewish fencers first immigrated to Palestine from Hungary, Austria, and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Upon leaving home, each brought a large valise containing swords, an iron mesh fencing mask, and fencing uniforms. One might wonder why these immigrants found it necessary to bring their fencing equipment to a country that was undergoing such harsh existential difficulties. In view of the hardships of the journey in those days, it is not difficult to imagine how many obstacles they encountered along the way. We can assume that the immigrants had a limited baggage allowance and that they likely left a great deal of their property behind. Why then did they go through the trouble of bringing along those items, instead of leaving them behind with other items from their former way of life?

The assumption underlying this paper is that fencing is something more than two people lunging at each other with swords. This paper discusses the role fencing played for a particular group of immigrants. Through a discussion of fencing, this paper examines the social role of leisure culture in the lives of immigrants.

Immigration constitutes the major focus of this paper. Many studies have discussed the role of sport in the absorbing society. Many claim that soccer serves as an effective mechanism of social integration. Indeed, popular sports such as soccer are likely to help immigrants quickly acculturate into the new society. Being unable to speak the language is not a barrier, and neither are cultural differences and other assimilation difficulties, if you know how to kick a ball. Fencing, in contrast, is not a prevalent sport. It is deeply rooted in European culture and is associated with the elites.

In this paper, the social significance of engaging in sport in the immigrants’ native lands and how this significance changed after they arrived in their new home are examined. Fencing serves as a test case for understanding the social role of a unique leisure activity that immigrants import from its natural environment to new and foreign surroundings. Fencing in the context of preserving cultural, socioeconomic, and personal identity is also examined. The paper considers how immigrants determine their boundaries of belonging and the way in which they become assimilated into the new society. What do immigrants choose to shed from their former lives? What do they choose to preserve? And how do they accomplish this?
Bearing in mind that fencing is a small and elitist sport that is not in the spotlight, can it serve as a test case for far-reaching social processes? Can the intimate history of a small group of immigrants engaging in an esoteric sport serve as a model for understanding the reciprocal relations between the individual immigrant and the absorbing society? This research does not intend to propose a uniform model that is valid for all sports in the immigration process. Rather, the goal of this paper is to try to understand how a specific leisure culture can help immigrants put down roots in a new environment.

Uprooting a particular leisure culture from the social and cultural context in which it emerged and transplanting it to another country is fraught with difficulties. In order to discuss the difficulties involved in preserving an elitist leisure culture such as fencing, we must first understand the status and role of this sport for European Jews. After that, we must become familiar with the circumstances of its new location. Did fencing manage to spread beyond the circle of its original competitors, or did it remain in a social enclave of immigrants preserving the culture of their countries of origin? To answer this question, we examine the sports organizations in Palestine and the relations between them. Moreover, both immigrants and British officers engaged in fencing. The significance of this activity shared by conquerors and those they have conquered goes beyond mere sports. This paper explores whether fencing enabled the two sides to create a place beyond time and space while disregarding political and national conflicts.

Fencing as a Jewish Sport

The roots of modern fencing are found in dueling, a common ritual among the social elites of Europe. Jews in Europe were attracted to dueling for two main reasons. First, engaging in dueling was a privilege restricted to the European nobility and the upper-echelon bourgeoisie; thus, it constituted a status symbol for the few who aspired to climb the social ladder. Second, Jews considered engaging in combat with anti-Semites to be an act of Jewish national pride and a confirmation of their status as citizens with equal rights. When Jews attempted to shape a separate and new group identity for themselves, they punctiliously imitated the manners of the Christian dueling leaders, mainly those in Germany. The habits of the Jewish dueling societies closely resembled those of the Christian societies, which included guzzling, fencing, singing German songs, and wearing uniforms and the colors of student fraternities.

The transition from dueling to modern fencing took place in the 1890s. Among other things, a number of visual changes marked this transition. White uniforms and protective masks replaced the exposed bodies and the flowing blood. Everything about the appearance of the modern fencer exuded remoteness and segregation, almost to the point of sterility. These visual changes somewhat diminished the charm that accompanied dueling, yet the two disciplines were still more similar than different. European society did not have to fine-tune its social coding mechanisms in order to decipher the visual (and other) markers of modern fencing. Because joining a prestigious club and purchasing fencing equipment was quite expensive, modern fencing, like dueling, was perceived as an elitist activity. The rules of modern fencing were adapted to Olympic standards, and in 1896 fencing was one of the nine modalities of sport in the first Olympic Games in the modern era.