

Gretel Bergmann
(Margret Lambert) (1914–)



Through correspondence spanning two decades and a successful effort at negotiating the belated public recognition of Gretel Bergmann's sporting achievements, Burkhard Volkholz helped her find a way to reconcile with the country of her birth. He thus initiated, as Margaret Lambert has called it herself, a psychological healing process. In spite of her considerable apprehension, this made it possible for her to visit her former home 62 years after her athletic career had gotten her entangled in politics.

"I have tried very hard for the past 43 years to forget everything pertaining to Germany, including the language. I was not at all sure whether I wanted to answer your letter, but in all these years, you are the first person to contact me. None of my so-called friends I grew up with deemed it necessary to ever get in touch with me to maybe say: 'I am sorry for what happened then.'" Almost two decades separate the sentiments of her first letter to Volkholz in June 1980 and her acknowledgment, during her visit to Laupheim in November 1999, of the essential role her hometown played in the inner healing process she went through. This short biography endeavors to trace that development. Needless to say, her visit to Germany was only the visible sign of a complex emotional process, one experienced in a similar manner by every emigrant of that time who had been willing to

reconnect with her or his former home, despite the shadows of the past.

Volkholz's initial research was inspired by a newspaper article in 1980 commemorating Gretel Bergmann's formal induction into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in New York. His attention was drawn to a comment made in the article, that the only drawback to her commemoration was that the German sports community had not contributed. He therefore decided to get in touch with her and naturally, having been longstanding chairman of Laupheim's Gymnastics and Sports Club, athletics provided them with common ground. Thanks to his many contacts, he was eventually able to set in motion a number of tributes to Gretel Bergmann in Germany, which certainly influenced a change in how she felt.

A look into her formative years may help to shed light on why she felt the way she did towards her former home. Her father, Edwin Bergmann, was a co-owner of the family's hair company; having been one of the most important Jewish businesses in Laupheim, it still exists today under the same name. From an early age, Gretel was an active and enthusiastic member of Laupheim's Gymnastics Club. At the age of ten, she participated in her first competition. In a speech to be read on her behalf at the 125th anniversary celebration of the sports club, she wrote:

“Nothing, nobody can take away the wonderfully warm memories I have of growing up in a small town, of growing up in Laupheim. A large degree of credit of a much-enjoyed childhood has to go to the *Turnverein* where I spent so many hours. My parents, although bewildered by my passion for sports, allowed me to join while I was quite young.”

As schools in Laupheim only taught up to the tenth grade, Gretel had to transfer to a secondary school in Ulm, where she practiced as many as six sporting disciplines. Increasingly however, she began to refine her high jump, for which she had shown a particular aptitude, and was therefore invited to special training courses. In 1931, she reached a personal best of 1.5 meters in the high jump, securing her the fourth spot in the German rankings and separating her from the national champion by only two centimeters. This performance is all the more impressive, considering the scissor jump was standard practice at the time, while today the record only lies at over 2 meters as a result of a refinement in technique. After finishing school in the spring of 1933, her plan was to study at the Berlin Academy for Physical Education to become a PE teacher, but the rapidly changing political landscape shattered her dreams.

Initially she was accepted to the university, but after she alluded to her Jewish background, Gretel was advised to wait “until it is all over”. But when sporting

organizations began introducing the Aryan Paragraph, she could no longer enter national competitions nor use sports facilities for training purposes. The depiction of Jews as incapable of physical exercise was, as is well known, one of the many fanatical and racial stereotypes and defamatory statements of National Socialism. Since the existence of Jewish sporting organizations was not permitted, the Jewish community was robbed of any possibility to participate in sport – part of the social ostracism and isolation to which they were increasingly subjected. In the aforementioned speech of 1987, Gretel addressed this with the following statement: “Almost overnight I, together with so many others, was an outcast, an undesirable, and my idyllic life started to collapse. I will never forget those who tried to stay with us, like our good friend, Eugen Brunner, who sneaked into our house many a night, sometimes wearing his SS uniform. But neither can I forget those who turned away from us so easily, one of them being my best friend who lived right next door to us and who did not want to know me anymore.” In this general atmosphere and on Gretel’s initiative, an old potato field was leveled and used as a provisional training ground for football and field handball. Here she also stood in as a trainer.

The progressive deterioration of conditions for the Jewish community in Germany however, forced the search for an alternative. As Edwin Bergmann had busi-

ness connections in England, he suggested looking for an institution there at which his daughter could study to become a Physical Education teacher. Yet their search proved unsuccessful. And so, in the fall of 1933, Gretel enrolled at the London Polytechnic (now The London Metropolitan University) to learn English. There she had the opportunity to train with the polytechnic's team and made quite the impression with her performances in the high jump. In June of the following year, with a height of 1.55 meters, she became the women's national high jump champion. As he was on a business trip at the time, her father was able to witness her triumph and tell her in person that she had been ordered to immediately return to Germany to qualify for the national Olympic core team. She asked herself: "A year ago they threw me out because I'm Jewish – why do they now want me in the Olympic team?" One possible reason for this was apprehension on the German side that she might start for Great Britain.

The most decisive political motivation however, was without a doubt the threat on the part of the United States Olympic Committee to boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, should Jewish athletes be excluded from qualifying for the German team. The Nazis did not want to risk the United States' participation in the Games.

In correspondence with a US embassy official, the Chairman of Germany's Olympic Organizing Committee, Theodor Lewald, denied that there were German-Jewish athletes of Olympic quality and claimed that this was, contrary to the hostile attitude of the American Jewish population who falsely assumed racial prejudice as the reason, why German-Jewish athletes had been excluded from the Olympic Games. Lewald furthermore provided false information regarding Gretel's position in the rankings, stating her to be sixth and thus denying her right to a place on the Olympic team. Seeing as the high jump team would not have stood a chance without her, he suggested giving *Fräulein* Bergmann a place on the team to appease public opinion in Great Britain and the USA. He also made reference to the (ultimately successful) efforts to bring fencer Helene Mayer, whose father was Jewish, back from the USA to ensure that at least one "non-Aryan" athlete would compete for Germany. Attached to this written statement was a letter from IOC member Ritter von Halt to the Reich's Association for Physical Training, referencing the training logs of the Reich's Association of Jewish Front Fighters from June 1935 in Ettlingen, Germany. These confirmed that, of the female high jumpers, Gretel alone came into consideration for participation in the Olympic Games. Her recorded performances were 1.55 meters in Ulm and 1.53 meters in Ettlingen, which came very close to the

German record of 1.60 meters. She knew she was to assume the role of the “token Jew”.

Her only option to train was to do so alone and in poor conditions at the grounds of the lone Jewish sports association *Der Schild* in Stuttgart. Over the course of the next two years, she only managed to log sixteen days of training. Despite her use of the grounds, Gretel had no inner connection to the ideology of the Jewish sports movement, which had developed under increasing discrimination and incorporated some Zionist elements. She was also able to continue her studies at a sports academy in Stuttgart, which the children of Jewish former front-line soldiers were permitted to attend, already a rare exception at the time. Up until May 1936, Gretel was able to visit the school and train in an environment that was still relatively free from personal discrimination. Although she had to leave the school prematurely, she was nonetheless still able to receive her diploma. It was in 1935 at trials in Ettlingen, organized for the best German-Jewish athletes, that Gretel first met her future husband, Bruno Lambert. Born in 1910 and from the town of Andernach, he was a professional long jumper. Gretel had had to sign the declaration of commitment as early as February 1935, which at the time read: “...I accept the call of the Reichssportführer of my own free will, to join the ranks of the German youth, who is determined to train and commit to the German cause, which is also

mine...” Her recollection of the atmosphere at the Olympic training camp is one of conciliation.

A month before the Olympic Opening Ceremony, the regional Athletics Championships for Württemberg in southern Germany took place and even the *Ulmer Sturm*, a Nazi newspaper, reported on Gretel’s jump of 1.60 meters under “Bergmann, Stuttgart”. Extremely poor training opportunities, verbal abuse from the crowd and sodden lanes made for very unfavorable external conditions. Nevertheless, what was certain was that the three qualifying female Olympians were set for the Games (two years later, it emerged that one of the three, Dora (Heinrich) Ratjen, was actually male). The National Championships of July 11, 1936 served as the qualifying heats for the Olympics, however, because of her Jewish heritage Gretel was not allowed to participate. Being excluded from the qualifications did not necessarily mean she would be denied participation in the Olympics.

Then Gretel received a letter, dated July 16, 1936, sent on behalf of Reichssportführer Tschammer-Osten stating that he had not been able to include her on the team, which would represent Germany in the Olympic Stadium from August 1 to August 9. As the letter read, based on her recent performances, it was doubtful she had even expected to qualify. She was “rewarded for her efforts and enthusiasm” with a standing ticket. When later questioned about the events of 1936, Gretel wrote:

“Had I been allowed to compete, I would have given it my utmost to win. That would have without a doubt corroded Hitler’s theories of Jewish inferiority.” And in another conversation: “The more outraged I became, the higher I jumped, and had I been able to see Hitler’s face, I would have jumped like never before.” It was because of this anti-Semitic propaganda, that she justifiably saw herself as “the great Jewish hope. People were hoping a Jewish athlete would take part in the Olympic Games. Many German Jews knew my name. Although nobody really understood how I came to be selected for the national team, they all hoped I would take part.” Yet this hope was accompanied by a considerable fear of the consequences a prospective win would bring. She remembers doubting ever having a real chance to participate: “I was familiar with the Nazi mentality and it was clear to me that they could never let me go to the Games. They had to get rid of me – the only question was how.”

She did not respond to the “invitation” for a standing ticket at the Games. “I wouldn’t have gone! Not for a million dollars!” Given that the letter of refusal was sent just a day after the US team had departed for Europe, the humiliation resided in the instrumentality of her as a “token Jew” to prevent the impending boycott. Germany could have entered three athletes of each gender in every discipline, but only two women were nominated for the high jump. The German Athletics Association would

rather have lost a sure medal than have an athlete of Jewish heritage compete and possibly win in Hitler's presence. Gretel was falsely reported as injured to the members of the German team.

On May 16, 1937, the time had come for Gretel to leave Germany. With only ten Reichsmark in her pocket, she said goodbye to her parents and eleven-year-old brother in Ulm. It was uncertain whether they would ever see each other again, and in that fateful moment, Gretel swore to herself to never return to Germany.

Life in the United States was hard for her, as it was for almost every German refugee, considering very few were able to reestablish themselves in their learned professions. It was not until a year later that Gretel managed to start working as a physiotherapist. With great difficulty, she put together enough money for an affidavit of support for Bruno Lambert, who arrived in New York in 1938. They married shortly afterwards. It was during this time that she stopped using her given name and began presenting herself as Margaret. Adapting to society in the country of her exile led to Margaret forging a new identity. Alongside her job, Margaret continued to pursue her sporting career until the outbreak of the war. She did not become a US American citizen until 1944. Until then, she had been classified as an "enemy alien". After Edwin Bergmann had been deported to Dachau for four weeks in 1938, Gretel's parents and brother succeeded in

fleeing to England in 1939 and arrived in the US a year later. In New York, Edwin managed to establish himself to some extent in his line of work, but passed away in 1949. His wife lived until 1979. Her parents-in-law were murdered in a concentration camp; wealthy relations had denied them an affidavit. Her brother, Rudolf, who had worked at Universal Pictures in Berlin, was saved thanks to an affidavit from Carl Laemmle.

Exclusion and malice from the people closest to a person can traumatize them for the rest of their life. “Compared with the murder of six million innocent Jewish people, my fate was of little significance,” but nonetheless “the way in which I was excluded from the Olympic Games will stay with me until my very last breath.” This shows that the severity and weight of traumatic experiences can never be fully comprehended by an onlooker.

As already mentioned, Volkholz reached out to Margaret in 1980, which elicited the gradual change in her attitude towards Germany, and most importantly led to the belated recognition of her sporting achievements in the country in which she grew up. On Volkholz’s initiative, Margaret received an official tribute in 1983, in the form of a badge of honor presented on behalf of the German Athletics Association. During a ceremony, she was decorated with a “belated, but nevertheless prestigious and well deserved distinction” by the Consul Gen-

eral of New York. In her speech, Margaret said: “It would be dishonest to say that this award makes up for all the suffering I had to endure in 1936. Being able to participate in and possibly win a medal at the Olympic Games is the thrill of a lifetime – to have this opportunity taken away from you is not easy to forgive or forget. The idea and initiative for this tribute came from a man (Burkhard Volkholz), whom I have never met in my life. I find such a level of empathy from a complete stranger quite remarkable.” Yet at the same time, she admitted that hearing the enthusiastic reports about the former Jewish citizens of Laupheim having been invited, made her feel nauseated.

In her acceptance speech for the next honor in 1995, which included the naming of a sports hall after her in Berlin-Wilmersdorf and the mounting of a commemorative plaque there, she once again mentioned the role Laupheim had played in her change of heart and stressed “that it would be more than unjust to ignore the spirit which now exists in Germany.” In justifying her decision not to attend the event herself and instead send her sons, Gary and Glenn, in her place, she did not point out her oath from 1937 but made specific reference to her anxiety: “my heart said yes but my brain said NO. I am afraid the emotional impact might prove to be too much for me.”

As Margaret wrote in her letters to Burkhard Volkholz, the gesture made the following year by the German National Olympic Committee had done “more for the healing process than all the years gone by.” The NOC, together with the then president Walther Tröger, had invited her and her husband to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, as she would not accept any invitations to Germany for understandable reasons. In an interview for the New York Times, Margaret opened up about the intensity with which painful memories come back to her whenever she attends sporting events. In the same year, her former hometown held an exhibition in her honor at the town hall, for which Volkholz had once again laid the necessary groundwork. Margaret, in the welcoming speech she sent for its opening, wrote: “Please do not misunderstand my bitterness, which was not caused so much by my exclusion from the 1936 Olympic Games, but by the fact that I was forced to leave the country I had loved with all my heart. It is said that time heals all wounds but, without going into details, some of the scars will remain forever. [...] May I just tell you that your efforts to keep the Laupheim Jewish tradition alive is a most praiseworthy undertaking and undoubtedly appreciated by the former Jewish population.”

Receiving the Georg von Opel Award in Frankfurt in 1999 and then visiting Laupheim constituted the pinna-

cle of these tributes. It was also the first time Margaret and her correspondent met in person. As early as April, she had indicated that she had reached a point where she could no longer say “never” to an invitation to Laupheim. In 2009, the events of 1936 were finally adapted into a film entitled *Berlin '36*.

During her short stay in Laupheim, she remembered: “when the country I had loved with all my heart responded to my love with hatred towards me and all Jewish people, I was forced to leave. And I myself became filled with a hatred for everything German – a feeling that wouldn’t leave me for many years... In many speeches that I have held all over the US, I have stressed the fact that it is mostly due to Laupheim that an inner healing process could take place. I finally felt ready to return for a visit...” For others who were forced to emigrate, the process may have been less painful and difficult, but it is much more likely that they hid their pain from onlookers. Nevertheless, it is, if anything, representative of the ambivalent relationship of former German-Jewish citizens to Germany, to their childhood hometowns there and to their neighbors from that time.

Translated from the German by Ana Isabel Azúa Becker, Nadezhda Mileva, Barbara Nava and Ameera Rajabali,

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