

Uncovering the Italian Muscle Jew: from Zionist Gymnastics to Fascist Boxing

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Abstract

In this article I examine the presence and influence among Italian Jews of Max Nordau's image of the "muscle Jew" and more broadly of a virile imaginary, intertwined with Zionist and Italian nationalist ideas. I first document the relevance of an early phase of Italian muscular Judaism at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the time of the rise of Zionism in Italy. I then study the development, in the 1920s and 1930s, of a virile imagery among the two trends of Italian revisionist Zionism and of what we may call Italian Jewish Fascism. I end by asking whether there were not inherent contradictions, or at least relevant tensions, in the ideal of the muscle Jew, between radical nationalism and Jewish forms of virility, as developed after the First world war and in connection with the rise and stabilization of Fascism.

At the Origins of the Italian Muscle Jew
Nordau's Gymnastics, Italian Zionism and the Muscle Jew
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Muscle Jews: A Preliminary Conclusion

At the Origins of the Italian Muscle Jew

In the Spring of 1903, *L'Idea Sionista*, the first Italian Zionist periodical, published a translation of Max Nordau's essay "What Does Gymnastics Mean for Us Jews?". The article, which had originally appeared about a year earlier in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* [The Jewish Gymnastics Journal], stated:

During the thousands of years spent in the ghettos, we [Jews] have necessarily lost our physical aptitude for lack of exercise: we shall now endure great efforts to regain them. [...] It is true that a large number

of Jews have a defective appearance, but this is not natural, descending as it does from the neglect of physical education.

On the contrary, Nordau thought, “Any Jew who feels or is weak can obtain the muscles of an athlete,” and there are three prerequisites for this: “courage and fearlessness;” “complete control of all muscular groups’ for simultaneous and harmonic movements;” “the ability to rapidly imagine all the intended movements, so as to overcome any obstacle which may derive from shy and hesitant natures.” “Our mental and spiritual qualities are excellent, Nordau concluded, and we can obtain physical strength through exercise, becoming strong gymnasts and gaining admiration from all: this will elevate our own self-esteem.”¹

As it is well known, Nordau had actually first used the expression ‘*Muskel-judenthum*’ [muscular Judaism] in 1898, in his address to the Second Zionist Conference in Basel. These speech and phrase initiated a movement of ideas and activities especially in the German Jewish world which counter-posed the strong and physically trained Jew to the nervous and weak Jew – via articles, lectures, the promotion of physical activity, and the founding of various successful Jewish sport teams.² In the Italian context the formulas ‘muscular Judaism’ and ‘muscle Jew’ remained apparently unknown both at the time and afterward, as Italian Jewish

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¹ Max Nordau, “L’educazione fisica e gli Ebrei,” *L’Idea Sionista*, III, April-May 1903. All translations into English are mine, unless otherwise noticed. The seminal works inspiring this article are by George L. Mosse and Sander Gilman. See in particular George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985); Id., *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Id., *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991). See also, Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct. The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997). Special mention should be made of Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism. The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), the first work to thoroughly address the question of Max Nordau’s muscle Jew and its implications and afterlife in the German Jewish context. With regard to Nordau – and Jabotinsky, another major character in my story – I have especially taken into account Michael Stanislawsky, *Zionism and the fin-de-siècle. Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001).

² See Presner, *Muscular Judaism*. For the broader context: *Jewish Masculinities. German Jews, Gender and History*, eds. Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman and Paul Lerner, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012). A relationship between muscular Judaism and the previous muscular Christianity movement, born in the 1850s, is possible but has not been proven. Muscular Christianity, however, remained to my knowledge unknown in Italy.

newspapers only published excerpts of Nordau's speech. If '*Musckel-judenthum*' had ever reached Italy, in all likelihood it had done so through the French version of Nordau's speech, published in a widely distributed booklet. There, the expression was translated as '*Judaïsme aux muscles*.'³

In his essay on gymnastics Nordau provided a historical background to his arguments:

We do not know if originally Jews were taller and then became smaller because of the unfavorable conditions in which they lived. [...] Ancient sources disagree. Images of Jews on Egyptian and Assyrian monuments do not allow us to think that they appeared to the artist smaller than their non-Jewish neighbors. In [ancient] Rome, Jews of huge stature exhibited themselves for a fee. On the other hand, the Bible suggests that the Jews of Palestine had neighboring races that surpassed them greatly in height. One might think of Enoch's sons, or consider the description of Goliath vis-à-vis David. To conclude, we do not know whether we became small or always have been: one cannot deny, in any case, that currently we are smaller than the Germans, Russians, Anglo-Saxons, and Scandinavians; whereas we [Jews] are at least equal to the French, Italians, Spanish, Rumanians and Magyars.⁴

To an Italian Jewish audience, Nordau's references to Rome and the parallel with Italian and other Southern European peoples probably sounded as a confirmation of its own ancient presence. At the same time, the current ranking proposed by Nordau indicated a hierarchy of ethnic or racial groups in which both Jews and Italians did not feature prominently. The issue required further exploration and closer analysis from an Italian perspective.

Early twentieth-century Italian discussions on Jews and gymnastics shed light on aspects of the beginnings of Zionism in Italy. They show how Italian Zionist discourse was constructed through aspects of Jewish nationalism combined with

³ See Theodor Herzl et Max Nordau, *Discours pronocés au II^e congrès sioniste de Bale*, transl. Jacques Bahar, (Paris: au Bureau de Flambeau, s.d. [1899?]), 35-36: 'Le Sionisme réveille le judaïsme à une vie nouvelle, c'est ma conviction. Au moral il y amène en rajeunissant l'idéal national et, au physique, en façonnant les générations nouvelles, dont nous attendons la renaissance du *judaïsme au muscles*, des âges antiques (Applaudissements prolongés)' (emphasis added). The passage does not appear in the abridged Italian translation of the speech, given in the conference proceedings which appear in *Corriere Israelitico*, XXXVII, 30 September 1898, 104-105.

⁴ Nordau, "L'educazione fisica e gli Ebrei."

elements belonging to Italian nationalist discourse. Reflections on the national and ethnic characteristics of the Jews, part of the Zionist revival, appear in turn to have borrowed some elements from other nationalist discourses, including the emphasis on gymnastics in German nationalism.⁵ Aspects of Nordau's thinking, moreover, would appear to have been impacted by Italian – and even Italian Jewish – influences, since they also developed from the theories of Italian (and Jewish) social scientists: in particular Cesare Lombroso. This was the starting point for further developments which, through ongoing exchanges and influences surrounding the muscle Jew and Jewish manliness, would take new forms in later phases of Italian Zionism (revisionist Zionism) and in the Italian Jewish experience with Fascism. Italian Jewish nationalism and its imagery, both in its Zionist expressions and in what we may call its Jewish Fascist manifestations, confirm the relevance and role of the theme of masculinity and physical strength, in relation to national characters and nationalist ideas. As is the case in all nationalisms, they were the result of the combined influence of independent and self-reflecting components, as well as of discourses developed in the context of other national and nationalist experiences. In this article I reflect on the relevance of the founding phase of Italian muscular Judaism, which was especially influenced by Nordau at the beginning of the twentieth century, and on the development, in the 1920s and 1930s, of the two trends of revisionist Zionism and of what we may call Italian Jewish Fascism (gathered around the journal *La Nostra Bandiera*), and their connection to virile imagery.

Nordau's Gymnastics, Italian Zionism and the Muscle Jew

In the aforementioned issue of *L'Idea Sionista*, psychiatrist and Zionist activist Edgardo Morpurgo (1872-1942)⁶ published the first installment of a long essay which was to run through numerous issues of the journal under the title "On the Somatic and Psychic Conditions of the Israelites of Europe." A footnote to the first part of the essay introduced the article as a 'valuable theoretical contribution to the physical regeneration of the Jewish race, which is one of our liveliest aspirations'. Clearly the essay followed in the wake of Nordau's work. Morpurgo

⁵ See George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964); Id., *The Image of Man*.

⁶ The historiography on the origins of Italian Zionism remains scattered: I will only mention here, for a preliminary overview, Alberto Cavaglion, *Tendenze nazionali e albori sionistici*, in *Storia d'Italia, Annali II. Gli ebrei in Italia*, vol. II, ed. Corrado Vivanti, (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 1291-1320; D. Bidussa, A. Luzzatto, G. Luzzatto Voghera, *Oltre il ghetto. Momenti e figure della cultura ebraica in Italia tra l'Unità e il fascismo* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992).

examined data concerning the spread of physical and psychological illnesses among the Jews of Europe, but he insisted that the latter were not a “race.” Their condition was the result of a “set of causes [...] connected to the state of their surroundings and to sanitary conditions.” As for most scholars of the time, the Jews’ weaknesses were the result of centuries of persecution, of seclusion behind ghetto walls, and of the priority assigned to intellectual ability over physical strength within the Jewish community. Among the sources of Morpurgo’s ideas – and one of the main influences that shaped Nordau’s – we should certainly include the works of criminologist and social scientist Cesare Lombroso: in particular, *L’antisemitismo e le scienze moderne*. Here Lombroso writes: “The Jewish race is not strong. Especially the Jew living in the great Jewish towns of the East is often small, weak; he has a wrecked and miserable appearance. No other race appears weaker and yet has shown such strength in resisting evil.”⁷

In a concluding section of Morpurgo’s essay, the main solution for the physical and mental problems of the Jews is identified in gymnastics and this is seen as a possibility offered by Zionism. According to Morpurgo this path had already been taken in Germany on the initiative of Walter Rathenau, among others: now, Italy too was to follow this trail. As the Italian scholar remarked in *L’Idea Sionista*: “While the Israelites in Italy find themselves in better bodily conditions than the ones in Germany and Poland, still they are highly disposed towards nervous and mental illnesses, more so even than the Germans. This is why we are proud of the positive and civilizing effects of introducing also among us [in Italy] the Zionist enterprise of improving the bodily well-being of the Israelites.” A few months later, in March 1904, Dr. Morpurgo delivered an address entitled “For the physical education of the Jews” at the fourth Italian Zionist Conference, held in Milan. The speech was published the same year as a short booklet, in a book series edited by the journal. When assessing the history of the Jewish body and the health condition of the Jews, Morpurgo referred to a thriving Italian literature on physical education and gymnastics and thus quoted approvingly, for example, the most recent work by Angelo Mosso, *Mens sana in corpore sano* (Milan 1903). According to Mosso, the Jews had not been a military nation in antiquity and no other people had neglected physical education more than they had.⁸ Another major reference for Morpurgo was, again, Max Nordau himself. Morpurgo had noticed in his own research the emphasis on intellectual and social activities among

⁷ Cesare Lombroso, *L’antisemitismo e le scienze moderne* (Turin-Rome: L. Roux, 1894), 18-19.

⁸ Mosso had also dwelt upon “Latin effeminacy,” the need for physical exercise, and the weakening influence of Catholicism: see Angelo Mosso, “Le cagioni dell’effeminatezza latina,” *Nuova Antologia*, November 16, 1897, 249-265.

the Jews and a consequent lack of concern for their physical conditions, which produced a strong incidence of “mental alienation.” “Should we not educate our youngsters to moderate their aspirations, to limit their desires towards social life?”, the psychiatrist asked. “Such an educational principle would certainly lead to a diminution of that condition of anxiety, of that state of unhappiness in the youth, which Max Nordau has masterly described as a characteristic of modern civilization.”⁹

Morpurgo’s views were thus shaped by the combined influence of two sources: debates within the Zionist movement about the physical regeneration of the Jews, from Nordau to Rathenau;¹⁰ and a growing Italian literature on gymnastics and well-being that had developed in recent years as part of the project to build and reinforce the young Italian nation.¹¹ For an Italian audience, Nordau’s analysis and admonitions thus became part of a larger debate about the Italian character, at the crossroads between gymnastics and nationalist movements: a debate which appears in many ways to have developed along parallel lines in Italy and Germany.¹² At the same time, Nordau himself, for example in *Degeneration*, had quoted one of the major voices in the Italian debate, the aforementioned Angelo Mosso.¹³ And *Degeneration* – one of the works that inspired a whole stream of ideas about “degeneration” and “regeneration,” including that of the muscle Jew – was inscribed to the most prominent and influential Italian social scientist of the time, Cesare Lombroso.¹⁴ Although this hypothesis still requires detailed

⁹ Edgardo Morpurgo, “Sulle condizioni somatiche e psichiche degli Israeliti d’Europa,” *L’Idea Sionista*, January 1904.

¹⁰ Morpurgo’s views about Jewish physical regeneration also show some similarities with the positions held, and policies proposed, by Zionists in the Yishuv, such as those expressed by the demographer Arthur Ruppin (1876-1944), as sketched out by Etan Blum, “Toward a Theory of the Modern Hebrew Handshake. The Conduct of Muscle Judaism,” in *Jewish Masculinities*, 165-170 (with further specific bibliography).

¹¹ On this debate and, among other aspects, on the role of Angelo Mosso in this context, see especially: Gaetano Bonetta, *Corpo e nazione. L’educazione ginnastica, igienica e sessuale nell’Italia liberale* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990). See also Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: on Making Italians (1860-1922)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹² I have outlined some aspects of a possible comparison between the Italian Jewish and the German Jewish experiences in my essay “George Mosse, German Jews, Italian Jews” in *George L. Mosse’s Italy: Interpretation, Reception, and Intellectual Heritage*, eds. Giorgio Caravale and Lorenzo Benadusi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 47-64.

¹³ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, transl. from the second edition of the German work, (London: Heinemann, 1898), 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. VII-IX. The Italian translation also contained a “new preface in reply to Cesare Lombroso,” see Max Nordau, *Degenerazione*, 2nd ed., transl. G. Oberosler (Turin: Bocca, 1896).

exploration through published and unpublished sources, one could make the claim that there were Italian – and even Italian Jewish, in Lombroso's case – influences that had at least indirectly impacted the development of Nordau's *Muskle-Judenthum*, as Nordau, Mosso and Lombroso shared the same discourse which intertwined the ideas of nation, physical strength, and ethnic (or racial) and religious identity.

Italian Revisionist Zionism and Jewish Sports

From its origins Zionism thus proposed an ideal of virility and its organizations would plan and promote sporting activities and gymnastics. As soon as the movement was founded, at the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish sports associations were set up especially in Central and Eastern Europe, which mobilized through physical activities thousands of young Jews.¹⁵ Also in this area Zionism followed the path of other European nationalisms, by emphasizing the ideals of masculine strength, vigor and virility. Such ideals would be further reinforced by the experiences and imaginary of the First World War.

Radical ideals of strength and masculinity further developed in the mid-1920s with right-wing Zionism, including through the influence of non-Jewish national youth and political movements. This was especially true for Revisionist Zionism, which took its first steps in 1923-25 with the creation, by Vladimir Jabotinsky, first of *Beitar* and then of *Ha-Tzohar*, the original nuclei of the Revisionist movement. In Italy, the movement started its activities under the leadership of Leone Carpi (1887-1964) around 1925-26. In 1930 the Italian Revisionist Zionists began

Within the rich literature on Lombroso, see especially Nancy A. Harrowitz, *Antisemitism, Misogyny & the Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare Lombroso & Matilde Serao* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). The relationship between Nordau and Lombroso, and their mutual influence, still awaits a thorough investigation: as a starting point, also for Lombroso's attitudes towards Zionism and his own Jewish origins, see Emanuele D'Antonio, "Aspetti della rigenerazione ebraica e del sionismo in Cesare Lombroso," *Società e Storia*, XXIV, 92/4-6 (2001): 281-309. One should also not underestimate Lombroso's criticism of and dissent from Nordau: see for example his "Polemiche scientifiche" in Cesare Lombroso, *Genio e degenerazione. Nuovi studi e nuove battaglie* (Milan-Palermo: Sandron, 1898, 233-256). An assessment of this is: Antonio La Vergata, "Lombroso e la degenerazione" in *Cesare Lombroso. Gli scienziati e le nuova Italia*, ed. Silvano Montaldo, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), 55-93. See also Roberto Finzi, *Il pregiudizio. Ebrei e questione ebraica in Marx, Lombroso e Croce* (Milan: Bompiani, 2011), 49-80.

¹⁵ For an overview see *Emancipation through Muscles. Jews and Sports in Europe*, eds. Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

publishing their magazine, *L'Idea Sionistica*, which resuscitated the title of the early twentieth-century periodical.¹⁶ The pages of this periodical show the continued and growing relevance and popularity of Jewish sports in the imagination and propaganda of the movement: each issue featured a long section on sports, with news from all over Europe and Palestine, together with reflections on the importance for the Jewish nationalist movement of physical activities, gymnastics, athletics and other disciplines – especially soccer and boxing. In this period, *L'Idea Sionistica* also reflected the influence on the revisionist movement of ideals and catchwords from Italian Fascism, mostly due to the latter's fascination with sports and to its preaching the need for physical exercise. In the summer of 1930, one of the first issues of the revisionist Zionist journal featured an article on “Jewish Sports around the World” which stated:

If there is a meaning in the reawakening of sports throughout the Jewish world, which coincides with the national reawakening, it is the overcoming of the weak and unhealthy life of the ghetto, the entrance into modern life. [...] Some will say that physical effort is to be blamed as it causes the abandonment of the yeshiva in favor of the sports field. But we say this is not only a matter of physical effort, it is actually an entirely spiritual effort, and we rejoice in it.

Many reasons supported the Jewish interest in and commitment to sports: “We need to regain physical prowess [...] We need to educate ourselves to accept discipline and obedience towards our leaders: group sports are the most efficient means to this end. [...] They] accustom people to that kind of comradeship that really binds together the members of a nation.”¹⁷ The article, which shows a radicalization of language and ideas through increasing references to “discipline,” “obedience” and “comradeship,” ended with the Latin slogan – recently revived by Fascism – *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Every issue of *L'Idea Sionistica* now featured detailed information about competitions, matches and championships in which Jewish teams – for example the clubs Hakoah, Hasmoneah, Maccabea, and Hagibor – and Jewish athletes participated throughout Europe, testifying to the Jewish national and physical reawakening.

That Zionist and Fascist ideals and rituals were at times interwoven by the revisionists can be seen, for example, in the episode of the visit by the Milanese

¹⁶ Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, new expanded ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), 114.

¹⁷ “Lo sport ebraico nel mondo,” *L'Idea Sionistica*, I, July 1930.

Jewish sports association “Alberto Ottolenghi”¹⁸ to the city of Fiume – a symbol of Italian and Fascist nationalism on the north-eastern Italian border. Here the Italian team paid homage to the grave of an Italian Jewish patriot, Bruno Mondolfo, who had died in the name of Fascist ideals in Fiume, the city seized in 1919 by the poet and nationalist Gabriele D’Annunzio. The ceremonies in Fiume ended with the collective cry *Eidath!* (*sic*, for the Hebrew ‘*Heydad!*’, i.e. Hurray!) and *Alalà!* (the Dannunzian and Fascist cry for victory), in the name of the “rebirth of Israel.”¹⁹

Italian Jewish Fascism, Revisionist Zionism, and Boxing

The search for the Italian muscle Jew now leads us to the pages of another Italian Jewish periodical which, at the peak of Italian consent towards Mussolini’s regime and four years before the official anti-Semitic turn of Fascism, called itself Fascist and Jewish: *La Nostra Bandiera* [Our Flag].²⁰ The journal, and its homonymous movement, were founded in Turin in 1934, also as a reaction to the discovery of the mostly Jewish circles that led an antifascist conspiracy in the city. At the time the Fascist and anti-Semitic newspaper *Il Tevere* ran the sarcastic title: “Next Year in Jerusalem, This Year at the Special Court for Political Crimes.” In response, *La Nostra Bandiera* attempted to develop a synthesis between Jewish religious values and Italian ultra-nationalistic ideals. A couple of years after its founding, the

¹⁸ No study is currently available on Italian Jewish sports organizations or on the role of Jews in Italian sport; but information on this could be gathered through a survey of the Italian Jewish press. Certainly, Italian Jewish boxers would deserve special attention, especially in the context of Rome: starting with Lazzaro Anticoli, a.k.a. ‘Bucefalo’, (1917-1944), who was to die at the hand of the Nazis in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre (1944), and Pacifico Di Consiglio, a.k.a. ‘Moretto’, (1921-2006), who was captured by, but later escaped from, the Nazis (see *Il ribelle del ghetto: la vita e le battaglie di Pacifico Di Consiglio, Moretto*, eds. Alberto Di Consiglio and Maurizio Molinari, (Rome: Masterbags, 2009), and Maurizio Molinari, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Il duello nel ghetto. La sfida di un ebreo contro le bande nazifasciste nella Roma occupata* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2017)). Another area which also in Italy saw a relevant Jewish contribution was soccer: the Venice and the Naples soccer teams were both founded, at the beginning of the twentieth century, by Jewish entrepreneurs and sport supporters.

¹⁹ “Lo sport ebraico nel mondo,” *L’Idea Sionistica*, III, June-July 1932.

²⁰ On Italian Jews during Fascism the standard, if partly disputed, accounts are De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani* (which was translated as *The Jews in Fascist Italy: a History*, New York: Enigma Books, 2001) and Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: from Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, orig. ed. Turin 2000). A middle-path was taken by Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italia fascista e la persecuzione degli ebrei* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008, orig. ed. Paris 2006).

journal celebrated the proclamation of an Italian empire in Ethiopia and showed a keen interest in Italian Jewish contacts with Ethiopian Jewish (the so-called *Falasha* or *Beta Israel*).²¹

Physical strength, military courage, and virility were some of the ideals celebrated by *La Nostra Bandiera*, which was inspired by the Fascist ideology and worldview in this sphere as well.²² One no longer finds in the journal direct references to Max Nordau, and this does not come as a surprise since Nordau's Zionist rhetoric certainly would not have been appreciated by the anti-Zionists – and Italian nationalists – of *La Nostra Bandiera*. In some ways, Nordau's views on degeneration and regeneration had been indirectly incorporated by Fascist ideals of masculinity or, as a negative term of comparison, they had been overcome as decadent and bourgeois (still, Nordau was highly praised by Vladimir Jabotinsky in his book *The War and the Jews* of 1942).²³ On the other hand, the specter of Otto Weininger – a symbol of anti-virility – re-emerged in the same pages, but it was immediately banished as threatening the return of the historical accusations of Jewish effeminacy.²⁴ All this was during the time when the movement *La Nostra Bandiera*, and the Jewish community more generally, were witnessing the establishment of Nazi anti-Semitism as a State policy by the German fellow travelers of Italian fascism.

One episode in the history of the Jewish Fascist journal is particularly noteworthy. *La Nostra Bandiera* was especially stirred by the victory, in June 1934, of the American Jewish heavyweight boxer Max Baer over the Italian world champion

²¹ See Luca Ventura, *Ebrei con il duce. "La nostra bandiera" (1934-1938)* (Turin: Zamorani, 2002). A good introduction to the milieu of the journal and movement is the family story of its founder, Ettore Ovazza, as told by Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal. Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism* (New York: Picador, 1992). See also my biographical entry "Ovazza, Ettore," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014), vol. 80, 23-26.

²² Mosse's work is again relevant here, especially *The Image of Man* and the essays collected in his *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Fertig, 1999). See also: Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1996) and Lorenzo Benadusi, *The Enemy of the New Man. Homosexuality in Fascist Italy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, orig. ed. Milan 2005).

²³ See George L. Mosse, "Marx Nordau, Liberalism and the New Jew," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27/4 (1992): 577.

²⁴ See for example: f. m., "La psicologia dell'ebreo," *La Nostra Bandiera*, 15 November 1934, drawing heavily and explicitly on Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903). On Weininger's Italian reception, especially in the early twentieth century, see Alberto Cavaglioni, *La filosofia del pressapoco. Weininger, sesso, carattere, e la cultura italiana del Novecento* (Naples: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2001).

Primo Carnera.²⁵ This victory caused criticism and ironic remarks in the Italian press concerning the Jewish origins of Baer.²⁶ Baer's victory was especially discomfoting for Italians since Carnera had become a symbol of Fascist national virility, and was hailed as such by the Fascist regime. Moreover, Baer had recently also defeated the German boxer and Nazi star Max Schmeling,²⁷ so that this had turned out to be a double setback – caused by a Jewish athlete – for the future Rome-Berlin Axis. Also, beginning with the German match, Baer had placed and proudly exhibited a star of David on his trunks as a clear political statement.²⁸ The entire situation appeared to be contradictory and unsettling for *La Nostra Bandiera*: they had the Italian and Fascist champion Carnera on the ground (for which they were ashamed); and the winner was a Jew (for which they were inevitably somewhat proud). There was also a further complication in the fact that Baer was American, and anti-Americanism was another Fascist mandatory conviction in the 1930s. The Jewish periodical, in any case, took the occasion to clarify that: “We consider sport as the aspiration to the perfection of the body and we glorify the champions [i.e. both champions, Carnera and Baer], so that the youth may take them as an example and may attend to its own body as well as spirit.”²⁹ Responding to anti-Semitic attacks, the Italian Jewish Fascist periodical

²⁵ On the political and cultural aspects surrounding the personality of the Italian boxer, see Daniele Marchesini, *Carnera* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

²⁶ On Max Baer (1909-1959) and the prominent role of Jews in American boxing, as well as its symbolic and political implications, see Stephen H. Norwood, “‘American Jewish Muscle’: Forging a New Masculinity in the Streets and in the Ring, 1890–1940,” *Modern Judaism*, 29/2 (May 2009): 167-193. See also Allen Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Westport (CT), London: Praeger, 1997). The relationship between Jews and boxing thus long predates fascism and nazism.

²⁷ Max Schmeling (1905-2005) showed not only pro-Nazi, but also pro-Fascist sympathies, for example during a boxing cup organized by the Fascist regime in Rome in 1933 (see Norwood, “American Jewish Muscle,” 184). He had however become a sports icon already during the Weimar republic, including for Left-wing avant-gardes: see David Bathrick, “Max Schmeling on the Canvas: Boxing as an Icon of Weimar Culture,” *New German Critique*, 51 (1990): 113-136.

²⁸ Norwood, “‘American Jewish Muscle,’” 184. One may also consider here the broader symbolic meaning of this boxing match and the role of the duel in German and German Jewish fraternities in Wilhelmine Germany. Dueling (usually in the form of fencing) was seen as a performance and defense of the male code of honor; but in the case of Jewish fraternities or Jewish students it could also be a means of self-defense against anti-Semitic attacks. For Jews, participation in a duel was at the same time a means of part-taking in German culture and of sharing the German code of honor. There were no Jewish fraternities in Italian universities (nor a real system of fraternities), while the role of dueling among Italian Jewish students, particularly in response to anti-semitism, would require a specific investigation. In the meantime, for possible comparisons, see Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker, “Performing Masculinity. Jewish Students and Honor Codes at German Universities,” in *Jewish Masculinities* cit., 114-137.

²⁹ “L’ebreo Max Baer e le ‘sue’ pagliacciate,” *La Nostra Bandiera*, June 21, 1934.

downplayed the broader implications of the match and of its results: “We do not feel diminished as Italians by the fact that Carnera lost, as much as we do not feel increased as Jews by Baer’s victory.” ‘Boxing,’ the article insisted, “is not a fight between nations [and] races [...], but between strong men, able men, exceptional men.”³⁰ This was actually *La Nostra Bandiera*’s answer to the representation in the Turinese daily newspaper *La Stampa*, of Carnera as Goliath, and of Baer as a “David from the Ghetto” (*‘il Davide del Ghetto’*) and a “very astute *yid*” (*astutissimo yid*).³¹

In the same months of the polemic around the Carnera-Baer match (and of the debate concerning Weininger), another episode shed light on what we may perhaps call Italian muscular Judaism. This was the inauguration in the port town of Civitavecchia, on the Tyrrhenian Sea near Livorno, of the maritime school run by the Revisionist Zionist youth movement Betar, inspired and founded by Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky, who was also a staunch admirer of Mussolini, had convinced the Fascist regime to host in Italy what would become, years later, the first nucleus of the State of Israel’s navy. Preparatory documents signed by the Zionist activist show the role that gymnastics, including boxing, as well as military training, played in the training of the paramilitary group: Betar, moreover, was clearly also inspired by Fascist educational methods and Fascist organizations.³²

In 1931 Jabotinsky had informed the Italian Embassy in Paris that he was “personally very sympathetic towards Italy and Fascism and that [he] desired that Italian culture and influence would side with the movement he directed.” To that purpose, “also with the aim of creating action squads for the fight against the Arabs,” the Zionist activist sought to create in Italy “a special school, based on culture and sports courses, for the young men who should be sent to the Orient.” In exchange, Jabotinsky offered to exert “a wide action in favor of Italy.”³³

In a letter from the same period he sketched out the program of the school, which he called “Central School for the preparation of Jewish instructors of the sport of self-defense.” Jabotinsky enumerated the disciplines that would be taught there:

³⁰ “Marco Ramperti ovvero la slealtà,” *La Nostra Bandiera*, 25 June 1934 (Ramperti is the name of the journalist who attacked Baer because of his Jewish background in the newspaper of Turin, *La Stampa*).

³¹ Marco Ramperti, “Stile Max Baër,” *La Stampa*, 20 June 1934 (the Yiddish ‘yid’ is, unusually, in the original Italian).

³² On the history of the school and the Revisionist Zionists in Italy, see De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani*; Id., *Il fascismo e l’Oriente. Arabi, Ebrei, Indiani nella politica di Mussolini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988).

³³ See the report by the Italian diplomat Raffaele Guariglia to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 February 1932, *Stato e libertà. Il carteggio Jabotinsky-Sciaky, 1924-1939*, ed. Vincenzo Pinto (Soveria Mannelli, CZ: Rubbettino, 2002), 61.

“French and English boxing, jiu-jitsu [*sic*, i.e. *Jujutsu*, a Japanese martial art], singlestick fencing, swordplay, shooting sports and strength training. As a common base: elements of boy-scouting. [...] We want the young Jew to be able to defend himself in all the countries in which he is in danger.”³⁴ Identical words were used in another letter from the same period, in which Jabotinsky also made his ideological views explicit: “*Betar*, a youth organization, is not concerned with politics; but I personally do not hide my sympathies. [...] What I would like for now is to begin a mental orientation towards Mediterranean and Latin currents.”³⁵ Jabotinsky’s Italian correspondent reported the first arrangements he had made with the representatives of the Italian government concerning the establishment of the school: “The school will have a sports-military character; it will be able to organize sporting events, but not political ones. And it will not be a center of political unrest. There will be no identification with similar organizations of the [Fascist] Regime, for example with the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* [a Fascist youth organization].”³⁶ However, in the first year of the school, Leone Carpi, the leader of the Italian Revisionist movement, wrote to the president of the Italian maritime professional schools that the Civitavecchia school expressed the “aspiration that young Jews learn and promote Fascist culture and the Italian language, and make Fascist penetration in the Near East easier.”³⁷

³⁴ Vladimir Jabotinsky to Angelo Donati, 24 June 1931, copy attached to a letter from Jabotinsky to Leone Carpi, 19 November 1931, Leone Carpi, “Lettere di Jabotinsky,” in *Scritti in memoria di Leone Carpi. Saggi sull’Ebraismo Italiano*, eds. Daniel Carpi, Attilio Milano, Alexander Rofé (Jerusalem: Fondazione Sally Mayer, 1967), 44.

³⁵ Jabotinsky to Isacco Sciaky, 20 April 1932, *Stato e libertà*, 66. Three years later, again writing to Sciaky, Jabotinsky added the following disciplines to the above-mentioned program for the school: “[...] c) climbing; d) swimming; e) languages: Hebrew, Italian and a third one of choice; f) the history of Zionism; g) the history of the great colonization; h) the geography of Palestine, of the Levant and of the Mediterranean; i) the maxims and ritual of religion; j) etiquette (the *Hadar* code of behavior); k) State and society” (8 November 1935), *ibid.*, 89. *Hadar*, literally “majesty,” was the honorable behavior required of Beitar members, as illustrated by Jabotinsky in his writings: see *The Political and Social Philosophy of Ze’ev Jabotinsky*, ed. Mordechai Sharig, transl. Shimshon Feder, (London-Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 1999), 120-125 (from writings of the period 1928-1938, including a letter in Hebrew to the students of Civitavecchia, November 20, 1934).

³⁶ Sciaky to Jabotinsky, 25 April 1932, *Stato e libertà*, 69. Still, in a letter to the representative of the Italian Government, Raffaele Guariglia (2 December 1935), which he copied to Jabotinsky (3 December 1935), Sciaky would describe Beitar as an ‘organization which, *mutatis mutandis*, corresponds to the Opera Nazionale Balilla,’ *ibid.*, 93.

³⁷ Leone Carpi to Paolo Emilio Thaon di Revel, 28 October 1934, cit. in Vincenzo Pinto, “Between *Imago* and *Res*: the Revisionist-Zionist Movement’s Relationship with Fascist Italy, 1922-1938,” *Israel Affairs*, 10/ 3 (2004): 99. On the history of the school see also Leone Carpi, *Come e dove nacque la Marina di Israele. La Scuola Marittima del “Bethar” a Civitavecchia* (Rome: Nemi, 1967).

Two years later, *La Nostra Bandiera* proudly reported on the inauguration of the second year of the Civitavecchia school – there were thus a connection and clear sympathies between the Jewish Fascists and the Revisionists – which though officially set up for non-Italians, displayed a combination of Italian and Jewish pride.³⁸ The report was preceded, a couple of months earlier, by a laudatory review of the Italian edition of the book by Jabotinsky on *The Jewish Legion in the World War*.³⁹ As for the naval school, *La Nostra Bandiera* saluted the “robust Jewish youngsters of all countries” who had reunited to train on Italian waters, and portrayed them as “strong, healthy, full of enthusiasm and faith”.⁴⁰ After the inauguration of the school, a report by another magazine of the Italian Revisionists, *Davar*, recorded that the ceremony had ended with “a salute to the Duce and to Italy,” and with the singing of the Fascist anthem *Giovinazza* and of the Zionist *Hatikvah* [*sic*].⁴¹ This happened in the same month as the aforementioned staging of a Jewish and Fascist ritual in Fiume by the Revisionists. Already in July 1922, before the Fascist rise to power, Jabotinsky, who had spent part of his youth in Italy and greatly admired the country, had written to the future Duce:

Mr. Mussolini, I think you do not know the Jew. Perhaps I am wrong, but it seems to me that when you think about the Jews, you imagine a docile, unctuous, shrewd being, always defensive, always declaring his loyalty towards Italy, towards the ideal, and so on. These are fairy tales from last century, and even then they were fairy tales. If you would like to know our degree of vitality, you should study your own Fascists, and add just a bit more tragedy, a bit more tenacity – perhaps also some more experience.⁴²

“The punch is an exquisitely Fascist means of expression,” Mussolini used to say⁴³ (and Hitler praised boxing in *Mein Kampf*).⁴⁴ Also in this case – considering Jabotinsky’s admiration for and knowledge of Italy, as well as for the Italian Fascist

³⁸ “La scuola marinara di Civitavecchia per gli ebrei stranieri,” *La Nostra Bandiera*, April 15, 1936.

³⁹ Franco Momigliano, “La ‘Legione Ebraica,’” *La Nostra Bandiera*, February 29, 1936.

⁴⁰ “La scuola marinara di Civitavecchia.”

⁴¹ G. M., “La prima squadra marinara ebraica,” *Davar*, August-September 1934.

⁴² Cit. in *Stato e libertà*, 21 (the letter, dated 16 July 1922, was first published in full, for reasons of propaganda and clearly also thanks to Mussolini, by the anti-Semitic activist Giovanni Preziosi, *Giudaismo-Bolscevismo, Plutocrazia, Massoneria* (Milan: Mondadori, 1941), 65-69.

⁴³ Cit. in Marco Impiglia, *Mussolini sportivo*, in *Sport e fascismo*, eds. Maria Canella and Sergio Giuntini, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2009), 42.

⁴⁴ Bathrick, “Max Schmeling on the Canvas,” 128, note 37.

movement and its values – it is evident that both the revisionist Zionist muscle Jew or boxer, and the Italian Jewish Fascist (the muscle Jew promoted by *La Nostra Bandiera*), found a source of inspiration and a model in Italy. At the same time, the muscular image of the Jewish Fascist movement supported by *La Nostra Bandiera* probably followed, and identified with, the image of Italian Fascism in general: with its myths of virility, manliness, physical strength, physical violence; and without any particular Jewish reference.⁴⁵ Nor did it actually call for a specific Italian muscular Judaism, giving preference to the Italian nationalist ideals of strength and brawn, over a Jewish or Italian Jewish variant or interpretation of them. We know for example that the founder of the movement and journal *La Nostra Bandiera*, Ettore Ovazza (1892-1943), practiced and loved soccer and fencing.⁴⁶ But it is unlikely that he saw anything particularly Jewish about these sports: more likely these interests and hobbies reflected a broader male ideal or model of bourgeois respectability, which included healthy, well-trained and strong bodies.

Still, in a July 1933 issue, *L'Idea Sionistica* rejoiced – from a revisionist Zionist perspective – at the fact that a Jewish boxer had prevailed on a symbol of the “Aryan race,” Max Schmelling. The magazine further denounced, in this issue, its unease with the changing political context for two reasons. There was the fact that Germany had barred the Jewish tennis player Daniel Prenn from joining the national team at the Davis Cup, because of his origins. And there was also the announcement that the Olympic games of 1936 would be held in Germany, despite the Nazi rise to power and the spread of German anti-Semitic intolerance.⁴⁷ The first cracks were thus beginning to open in the epic of the European muscle Jew.

Muscle Jews: A Preliminary Conclusion

There were two major turning points in the history I have briefly outlined. The first was represented by the Great War: a time of profound transformations of the

⁴⁵ I have already recalled, for example, Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*; Mosse, *The Image of Man*, chap. 8, “The New Fascist Man.”

⁴⁶ In one of Ettore Ovazza’s personal Fascist Party files (“Scheda personale del Camerata”), dated 21 February 1931, under the entry “Sports practiced,” Ovazza recorded: ‘*footboal* [sic] – *scherma*’, see Fondo Partito Nazionale Fascista, box 106, file 6694, State Archive, Turin. Ovazza Ettore fu Ernesto. In Ovazza’s writings, for example in his *Diario per mio figlio* (Turin: Sten, 1928), I have not found any special reference to virile or muscular imagery.

⁴⁷ r.[enato] c[oen]., “Lo sport ebraico nel mondo,” *L’idea Sionistica*, IV, July 1933.

image of man. In many ways, this brought to a peak – and hence transformed and radicalized – the ideals of courage, physical strength and virility, which had been developed throughout Europe since the 19th century in relation to the discourse and imagery of the nation.

For Italian Jews – as for all other European Jews – this was also a time of forced integration within the nation: one in which muscular identities were imagined in a more chauvinistic and less particularistic way within each country. While fighting in the trenches, Italian, German, or French Jews would hardly have agitated the ideal of a muscle *Jew*, as they were exclusively and intensively focused on their respective national identities. As George L. Mosse first showed,⁴⁸ this was a time in which a nationalist and especially Christian imagery was imposed on all, deleting minority identities or alternative expressions of identity via the imposition of national and nationalist paradigms. At the same time, the war prepared the grounds for a new virility: for new kinds of brawn, which in Italy would be reactivated, exercised, and celebrated to a maximum degree by Fascism. This transformation also produced new types of muscular Judaism, based on new articulations of and syntheses between the Jewish side and the various (in our case, Italian) national sides. Among the most striking outcomes were the ideal of the new Revisionist Zionist muscle Jew, in its international and Italian articulations, as well as the distinctive aspects of the Italian Fascist muscle Jew, chiefly promoted by *La Nostra Bandiera*, and the various interactions between the two.

The second turning point was also a tragic conclusion to the history of the muscle Jew (before its reappearance in different forms after the Second World War, especially in connection to the founding of the State of Israel and its new virile Jewish identity): just when these experiences and their discourses had reached their peak, they collapsed with the radicalization of anti-Semitism, racism, and the rise of anti-Jewish State persecution. From the very beginning inherent contradictions, or at least relevant tensions, were probably to be found in the ideal of the muscle Jew, between radical nationalism and Jewish forms of virility: but we are only able to state this in hindsight. The extreme exaltation of nationalist identities, and of their bodily expressions, could not tolerate – nor, ultimately, admit – the coexistence within them of different articulations, or versions, of national, nationalist, and ethnic or racial ideals and types, and of their embodiments. Perhaps extreme ideals of strength can only find expression in absolute and holistic national and nationalistic identities, which cannot envision hyphenated, or mixed, or blurred variants. They can materialize exclusively in Italian or German – not

⁴⁸ George L. Mosse, *The Jews and the German War Experience, 194-1918* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1977); Id., *Fallen Soldier*.

Italian Jewish and German Jewish – identities, and their respective national muscles. Thus I have mentioned Italian Fascist Jews mostly sharing a Fascist muscular imagery, rather than articulating a specific Jewish version of it.

While the ideal of the muscle Jew had also emerged in reaction to anti-Semitism,⁴⁹ the fear of degeneration and the striving for physical regeneration, shared by millions, was not to survive the extreme radicalization of national identities and their bodily expressions in Fascism, Nazism and, eventually, the Holocaust. In the final, tragic context of extreme anti-Jewish persecution, bodies would no longer be exercised, celebrated and exalted, but rather despised, ill-treated, destroyed.

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⁴⁹ Presner, *Muscular Judaism*; Norwood, “American Jewish Muscle,” 176 and 178; Bloom, “Toward a Theory of the Modern Hebrew Handshake,” in *Jewish Masculinities*, 156.