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Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes by John Rosengren
(review)

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John Rosengren. *Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes*. New York: New American Library, 2013. 400 pp. Cloth, \$26.95.

David Surdam

To paraphrase a popular movie title, there's something about Hank. My father, who cared little about baseball, knew very few Jewish people. Yet when he talked about baseball, he mentioned Hank Greenberg as a great player—not Babe Ruth, but Hank Greenberg. While John Rosengren's new biography on Hank Greenberg is comprehensive and lengthy, it provides a pleasurable reading experience. Better yet, despite the hyperbolic subtitle ("The Hero of Heroes"), Rosengren presents a well-rounded portrait of Greenberg the man.

Rosengren reveals that Greenberg was not "Roy Hobbs," a natural player. He was big, ungainly, and lacked self-confidence. One of his key attributes, though, was his determination. Again and again, Greenberg felt the need to prove himself and did so by outworking many of his peers.

Of course, a key element in the Greenberg story is his Jewishness. Even eight decades later, a player's ethnicity or race can be an identifying mark (Witness 2012's "Lin-sanity" with Chinese American basketball player Jeremy Lin). As with many children of immigrants, the young Greenberg struggled to reconcile his life in America with his parents' cultural mores. As in the Lou Gehrig story, Greenberg's parents did not initially understand or approve of his love of baseball, but they grew to appreciate the fame and respect their son earned from his ball-playing prowess.

Greenberg's debut during the 1930s came at a dramatic moment for Jewish people. With virulent anti-Semitism erupting in Germany and spreading across Europe and even America, Greenberg, similar to Joe Louis and, later, Jackie Robinson, could not simply be a baseball player. He became a symbol, which is a particularly difficult burden for any person to carry. If he failed or reacted in an unseemly way, some people would ascribe his behavior to all Jewish people. Even when sportswriters praised Greenberg, they resorted to stereotypes. For example, Dan Parker writes, "But none of these attributes is half as important to Hank's baseball career as the good old Jewish qualities of thoroughness and perseverance" (161). Rosengren believes Greenberg "changed the way Jews thought about themselves" (162). Since he cherished his privacy, this burden was an exceptionally onerous one; fortunately, as with Jackie Robinson, he handled it largely with grace and aplomb.

The book opens with Greenberg pondering whether to play on Rosh Hashanah during the 1934 season. The Tigers were hanging on against the Yankees, so the game was a critical one. He had promised his parents he would not play, but his teammates and the Detroit fans needed and wanted him to

play. He played and performed wonderfully, increasing his popularity with the fans. Sad to say, the Detroit fans and management proved remarkably fickle throughout his career (shades of that other hero, Ted Williams). Greenberg's decision mirrored that of Sandy Koufax in the 1960s. Unfortunately, Rosengren calls Greenberg the greatest Jewish player, but a similar claim could be made for Koufax. There's no point in anointing one or the other.

"What-if" questions swirl around Greenberg. After the Tigers captured consecutive pennants in 1934 and 1935, the team appeared primed to rebuff a resurgent New York Yankees club in 1936. Greenberg broke his wrist early in the 1936 season, and player-manager Mickey Cochrane was badly beamed. The balance of power shifted to the Yankees, who won the 1936–39 pennants by blowouts. Would the Tigers have been able to capture a third consecutive pennant had Greenberg and Cochrane been healthy? Greenberg lost many of his prime playing years to military service. Would he have ended up with more than five hundred home runs had he not lost those years, or would injuries have sidelined him? How much money would he have earned in more recent years? As a sign of the era, Greenberg had to fight to get a five thousand dollar raise after driving in 170 runs in 1935 (only his third season in the major leagues). He had an easier time getting a five thousand dollar raise after hitting 58 home runs in 1938 (179). Similar to Joe DiMaggio, Greenberg had a keen sense of his value to the team, so he fought hard for pay raises. In the midst of the Depression, his concern over money irritated many fans.

As World War II ended, Greenberg returned from military service in time to help the Tigers win the 1945 pennant. Greenberg played in his fourth World Series. The three times he was healthy during the World Series, he hit over .300 in each, along with at least one home run. While he was disappointed with his 1934 showing, failing in some key situations, he certainly had an enviable postseason record.

After he stopped playing, Greenberg became a front-office mainstay of the Cleveland Indians. As general manager, he developed a reputation for being a tough, even ruthless, negotiator. Aside from the team's triumph in 1954, Greenberg's efforts were sufficient to maintain the Indians as perennial runners-up to the New York Yankees.

While Rosengren describes how Greenberg was capable of extraordinary feats of grace, such as encouraging Jackie Robinson at a crucial moment, he also relates incidents of pettiness, such as mistreating Al Rosen. Because he was a symbol of both hope and hatred, Greenberg had to deal with annoying and ugly distractions. He could erupt in bad temper. That he did not always respond with grace and dignity does not diminish him, because as Rosengren documents, the ledger was heavily balanced in favor of grace.

Rosengren's biography is likely to remain the definitive biography of Hank Greenberg, especially since the eyewitnesses to Greenberg's life are fading. Greenberg is fortunate to have Rosengren for a biographer.

Robert C. Cottrell. *Two Pioneers: How Hank Greenberg and Jackie Robinson Transformed Baseball—and America*. Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2012. 270 pp. Cloth, \$27.50.

Rob Edelman

Every contemporary grade-schooler should know that Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play in the major leagues in the twentieth century. That's a fact of history, and it transcends balls, strikes, and on-field exploits. Hank Greenberg, on the other hand, may not have been the first of his faith to make the majors, but he was the initial bona fide Jewish baseball superstar and surefire Hall of Famer. When Robinson came to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, Greenberg's career was on the wane; that year was the last of his thirteen big-league seasons. Yet both are linked in that, during their time in the limelight, they frequently (and often painfully) confronted the pervasive racism and anti-Semitism that were embedded in the American fabric. Their life stories—with an emphasis on how, in their time, both men were set apart from the mainstream of professional baseball—are simply and effectively recounted in Robert C. Cottrell's *Two Pioneers: How Hank Greenberg and Jackie Robinson Transformed Baseball—and America*.

Because the struggles of Greenberg and Robinson are well-documented elsewhere, the baseball fan with a grasp of the sport's history will already have insight into their lives as presented by Cottrell. The author also need not remind such fans of the rudimentary facts of baseball's past; even casual followers of the sport will know that the 1941 season was highlighted by Ted Williams's .406 batting average and Joe DiMaggio's fifty-six-game hitting streak. But the reportage contained in *Two Pioneers*, which consists primarily of profiles of both ballplayers, offers a first-rate introduction to younger readers. Additionally, Cottrell puts forth some facts and insights that are well worth pondering, and that just may expand the awareness of those already in the know. For instance, he observes that, under different circumstances, Robinson easily might have played professional football or basketball—and thus, baseball history would have been inexorably altered. Greenberg, who was