American Jewish Women on the Court: Seeking an Identity in Tennis in the Early Decades of the Twentieth Century*

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INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as eastern European Jews immigrated to the United States, a stereotype of Jewish physical inferiority became prominent in American society. As noted in articles elsewhere in this volume, American Jews promoted sports for men as a way to challenge this stereotype, largely because most Americans associated athletic competition with masculine identity. Even though the stereotypical “Jewish” athlete was clearly male—as the Jewish press, institutions, and communities promoted male athleticism as a way for Jews to integrate into society as productive Americans—nonetheless, Jewish women also participated in the American sporting world during the inter-war period. Most notably, several Jewish women succeeded at the highest levels of competitive tennis and thus contributed to a reassessment of the national perspective on Jewish identity. The most famous of these women was Helen Jacobs, but there were also Clara Greenspan, Baroness Giacomo Levi, Millicent Hirsch, among others, who won victories on the court and praise off the court within both gender and Jewish contexts. The American press and the American Jewish press, in particular, shaped the popular perceptions of these American Jewish women tennis players. This, in turn, gave these talented American Jewish sportswomen the opportunity, as I have argued elsewhere, to challenge stereotypical views of American Jewish

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women as lacking athletic ability, being physically weak, and generally disinterested in sporting activities (Borish, “An Interest in Physical Well-Being”; “Athletic Activities of Various Kinds”; “Jewish Sportswomen”).

In an article in Pittsburgh’s *Jewish Criterion* entitled “Lights of New York,” on August 31, 1934, Martha Neumark stated, “The athletic fields of New York and immediate vicinity now have indelibly stamped upon them the marks of the prowess of a trio of Jewish women.” Neumark further asserted, “Their phenomenal exploits are destroying for all time the pallid, sentimental picture of the Jewish woman perennially stagnant in the kitchen or nursery.” In referring to Helen Hull Jacobs’ victory at the United States Women’s Singles Championship in New York, the journalist hailed her accomplishments (28). Jacobs and other American Jewish women-athletes paved the way for future Jewish tennis players such as Gladys Heldman and her daughter Julie Heldman, and helped facilitate tennis’s opening up to other ethnic and minority groups (Borish, “Jewish American Women” 106). Using primary sources, especially American Jewish periodicals such as the *Jewish Criterion*, *The Sentinel*, *The American Hebrew*, and the mainstream American press such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, among other sources, this article intends to show how American Jewish women on court actively shaped the sporting culture for both Jewish and non-Jewish women and, in doing so, significantly advanced the popularity of women’s tennis in the 1920s, 1930s and beyond.

**THE GROWTH OF TENNIS FOR AMERICAN JEWISH WOMEN**

Tennis in the United States gained popularity initially as a lawn competition for the white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant upper classes as part of their elitist display of leisure and social status. At the country clubs that were largely their exclusive domain, tennis formed part of the social class distinction for those who had sufficient leisure time for sports. Tennis at the Newport Casino in Rhode Island, for example, formed part of the playground of the rich in New England along with other sports such as golf, polo, archery, swimming, and social activities such as dining and dancing. Lawn tennis was introduced to American white upper class sportsmen and sportswomen by Mary Ewing Outerbridge, who brought the game to members of the Staten Island Baseball and Cricket Club in 1874. Her brother and others soon became interested in lawn tennis, and
this led to the first lawn tennis tournament in the United States on September 1, 1880. The United States National Lawn Tennis Association was formed in May 1881 and women’s tennis soon followed with a national tournament, the United States Tennis Championship, beginning in 1889 (Gems, Borish and Pfister; Gillmeister; Tingay). Upper class Jewish women in the late nineteenth century, especially those of German Jewish descent, were allowed to participate at some of these tennis clubs (Borish, “Jewish American Women”). Tennis, like golf, offered upper-crust Jewish women a sport they could play competitively, most notably if they possessed outstanding abilities. Other Jewish women, particularly immigrants, generally first learned tennis at Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Associations (YMHA/YWHA), known as Jewish Y’s in the early twentieth century. Eventually, by the inter-war period, some American Jewish women sufficiently excelled in tennis to move from exclusive clubs to the competitive public arena.

Most notably, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the New York YWHA, which opened in 1903, accommodated the activities of Jewish sportswomen. A new women’s Y featured “a swimming pool, 20 feet by 60 feet, a gymnasium” and “a roof garden with tennis courts.” One New York newspaper hailed the Association as “the most comprehensive program of physical education in the country for Jewish women and girls” (Borish, “‘Athletic Activities of Various Kinds’” 248–49; Borish, “‘An Interest in Physical Well-Being’”). Likewise, in Hartford, Connecticut, the YWHA was founded in 1915 by a group of Jewish young women, originally in the facilities of the city’s YMHA. The association grew fairly quickly, and the YWHA leaders decided they needed a place for their own activities, rather than face constraints on religious, educational, and sporting endeavors. By 1919, Hartford YWHA members took physical education classes and played sports like swimming, tennis, basketball, volleyball, badminton, track-and-field, and bowling; and some young women competed in leagues against both Jews and non-Jews. Although the Athletic Department lacked sufficient facilities, Hartford Jewish women pursued sports using public high school gymnasiums, public parks, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) swimming pools, and other places for their athletics including tennis. The Hartford YWHA team played the YWCA in tennis, bowling, and other sports. The women also pursued tennis competitions, using the public courts in Hartford. Jewish girls, wanting to learn tennis, received free lessons from the chair of athletics, who organized this activity with the support of her administrative committee. While these institutional activities illustrated the growing popularity of tennis for some Jewish women
on the local level, the American and American Jewish press focused, as they did in other sports, on the national stars of the day. And during the inter-war period, Jewish female tennis players succeeded in tournaments to a remarkable extent and were accordingly singled out and hailed by the press.

CLARA GREENSPAN AND THE GENDERING OF WOMEN’S TENNIS

Within the competitive ranks of women’s tennis, a fair number of Jewish star players emerged in the early twentieth century. Clara Greenspan became one of the most prominent female tennis players, earning accolades as a champion in the late 1920s. Greenspan, the captain, coach, and manager of the Hunter College tennis team, won the Women’s New York State Singles and Doubles Championships and Eastern Clay Court Championship in 1928. Greenspan also played in the National Tennis Championships at Forest Hills, and the following year, she won the Women’s Metropolitan Clay Court Championship and was a finalist at the prestigious North-South women’s singles tournament, where she also made it to the finals in the doubles event. Highpoints in Greenspan’s tennis career include her selection to participate in the popular team matches for the Sears Cup, representing the Eastern Lawn Tennis Association, competing against the top players of the New England Lawn Tennis Association. Her success brought media attention, as mainstream newspapers such as the New York Times as well as Jewish papers covered her tennis achievements and male journalists often resorted to somewhat gendered language to emphasize the feminine aspects of her achievements as a Jewish athlete.

In 1928, as Greenspan won victories on the court, New York Times sports-writer and journalist on women’s tennis, Allison (Al) Danzig wrote about this emerging star. The headline on June 14, 1928 read, “Miss Francis Loses to Miss Greenspan. Tenth Ranking Player Put Out of Met. Clay Court Event, 4–6, 6–3, 6–2.” Danzig noted, “Two young tennis players, one of them enjoying an established reputation on the courts and holding a position in the first ten, the other just beginning to make a name for herself in the game, met in the women’s metropolitan clay court championship at the University Heights Tennis Club yesterday, and the verdict was victory for the newcomer.” Danzig observed Greenspan’s improvement during the match, which proved to be the decisive edge in the victory over her highly ranked opponent. According to Danzig, the left-handed Greenspan honed her shot making skills as the match progressed.
“It was also apparent that Miss Greenspan had a backhand drive, which never came back twice in the same direction, and always with good depth, whether it was played down the line or across court, and once she found the range of the lines with it the Jersey girl’s [Francis’] problem was not going to be so simple” (35). The New York Times covered other Greenspan victories during 1928, as she won the Ardsley Tennis Clubs invitation tennis tournament, again beating Francis in a three set match, 2–6, 6–3, 6–4. Greenspan’s power undermined stereotypes that Jews—let alone Jewish women—were physically inferior, and this theme was emphasized as a highlight in the reporting of the match: “The slight Miss Francis was unable to withstand the long rallies that featured nearly every game. The match was a base-line duel at first, but Miss Greenspan took the net more frequently as the match progressed and earned many points.” The reporter noted how Francis “tired rapidly after the first set” (Danzig, “Miss Greenspan Wins Ardsley Tennis Final” 17). As Greenspan gained more victories with increased experience on the tennis court, Danzig applauded Greenspan’s athletic ability: “The endurance of youth and the daring and sharpness of her ground strokes carried Miss Clara Greenspan to the women’s metropolitan clay court championship yesterday, just as they earned for her the New York State and Eastern titles in 1928.” Focusing on the female form in his gendered comments on Greenspan, however, Danzig also commented that, “the slender, dark-haired Hunter College girl outlasted Mrs. Bernard F. Stenz in a hard-fought match that consumed more than an hour in the broiling sun, to win at 6–3–9–7” (Danzig, “Met Tennis Crow to Miss Greenspan” S1).

The fact that some American Jewish women (like Greenspan) gained access to suitable gender-oriented American sports like tennis in college also caught the attention of American Jewish journalists. For example, Harry Conzel in “Our Sporting Column” of Pittsburgh’s Jewish Criterion (April 1925) included material about the “American-Jewish Girl Athlete.” He commented that, contrary to some popular perceptions that there was a lack of American female athletes, Jewish girls should also be factored into the growing popularity of sports for American girls in the 1920s. Indeed, that decade is often referred to as “The Golden Age of Sport,” with “Golden People” as popular heroes, as sports gained increasing coverage in the print media and further wide dissemination thanks to the new technological advances of the radio. In various ways and for several diverse girls in American culture, sports became a more visible activity (Gems, Borish, and Pfister; Gallico). As American girls pursued certain physical activities, Conzel argued, “We thus find the American Jewish girl is by far the best conditioned, healthiest specimen of Jewish womanhood
throughout the world.” Part of this partaking of sport and physical culture activities for Jewish young women came from their expanded opportunities for sports at Jewish organizations like Jewish Y’s and at other educational institutions. But there were in fact a variety of opportunities for Jewish women, as Conzel asserted:

> The Jewish girl in American has been affected by the athletic atmosphere which is prevalent in our schools and colleges—and true of our American life in general. In the last few years, this Jewish girl, taking full advantage of all these opportunities, has come to the forefront in tennis, swimming and basketball. (“Our Sporting Column” 44)

Some Jewish young women who were learning tennis at various YWHAs may have sought to emulate Greenspan as her exploits were highlighted in the American Jewish press. In August 1928, the *American Hebrew* featured Greenspan in a piece entitled “A Rising Star, Clara Greenspan, Winner of Many Championships,” in which the male journalist praised her for displaying the “fine complexion that comes with a healthy outdoor life.” Endorsing tennis for women, the *American Hebrew* writer pronounced that she “makes a picture equally attractive on the court or in a ballroom” (Gumpert; Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* 204).

While such gendered comments about Greenspan’s appearance undervalued her athleticism, other male journalists in the American Jewish press focused on their hope and expectation that she would maintain her tennis success. In particular, sports columnist George Joel often commented on Greenspan and other American Jewish sportswomen in his column “Jewish Sports Notes,” published in *The Jewish Criterion*, *The Sentinel*, the *American Jewish Weekly* of Chicago and other newspapers during the 1920s and 1930s. Writing in the *Jewish Criterion* on June 22, 1928, Joel remarked, “Clara Greenspan, a Jewish young lady, won the Eastern Clay Court Championship when she defeated another Jewess, Florence Sheldon in the final round by the score of 6–2, 9–7.” In this match, Sheldon lost because “Clara could outdrive and outplace her” (23). Unlike some of the other American Jewish tennis players who achieved success on court, discussed below, Greenspan did not come from a wealthy background and remained a student for most of her playing career. Joel remarked in *The Criterion* on June 29, 1928 after Greenspan was absent from some tennis tournaments that, “This column’s favorite Jewish woman tennis star, Miss Greenspan, is on a forced vacation from tournament play. Not being one of the idle rich, she cannot afford to travel around the country to tournaments and
has as yet not found a backer” (Joel, “Jewish Sport Notes” 27). Providing information to Jewish readers about Greenspan became a frequent element in Joel's sports reporting. He wrote, for example, in “Sport Notes,” for July 20, 1928, “I am still very much interested in the progress of Clara Greenspan on the courts. The last month has been an idle one for the Jewish player, but she expects to play a few tournaments in August.” He offered that, “I am willing to bet that she is going to raise havoc [sic] with some of our ranking women tennis stars” (27).

Toward the end of the women's outdoor tennis season in 1928, Joel once again seemed optimistic about Greenspan's tennis career and her role as an American Jewish sportswoman. Referring to a match covered in the *New York Times*, he stated in *The Criterion* of October 5, 1928, “The outdoor tennis season is fast drawing to a cold close, but before the snow covers the courts Clara Greenspan managed to get in one more victory and clinch a national ranking, when she won the Ardsley Club Women's Tournament. . . . Miss Francis rated tenth last year, and I don't see how Miss Greenspan can be kept out of the ranking.” Joel extolled Greenspan's athletic record on court:

During the season Miss Greenspan won the Metropolitan, the New York State and the New Jersey State championships. All major tournaments with large entry lists. This is Clara's first year of big time tennis, as she began to attract attention only a few years ago, when she won the Girls' championship at Central Park, New York City. Her exploits this season definitely place her in the ranks of the stars, and I think that she has both the ability and the fight to go a good deal higher. The will to win is exceedingly important in tennis, and very few women players have it. They become easily frightened at their opponent's reputation and go to pieces. Miss Greenspan is a very hard young lady to impress, and especially so when another young lady is across the net. (40)

The following year, the American Jewish press, and especially Joel, continued to focus its attention on Greenspan's tennis career. In his “Jewish Sports Notes” column in *The Sentinel* he covered Greenspan's victory on court in another tournament and stated, “Clara Greenspan Wins her First 1929 Title.” In June, Joel declared, “Clara Greenspan, our one and only Jewish woman player, came through to win the Metropolitan Singles Championship by defeating Mrs. Stone in the final round in straight sets.” Joel expounded Greenspan's tennis and Jewish identity in his comments:
The Jewish girl was in rare form and blasted her opponent off the court with her forceful and clever placements. It was a sweet match to watch, plenty of action and very good tennis. It showed Clara a much improved player over her 1928 form when she won the New York State and Eastern titles to get an eleven ranking. Clara hopes to crash the first ten this year. I think she will. (13)

It is worth noting that, Greenspan received recognition from Joel as “our . . . Jewish” tennis player, showing the ethnic pride and Jewish identity linked with such a skilled female tennis player. While another Jewish tennis player, Helen Hull Jacobs, featured below, was just then emerging from success at the junior ranks and soon would show her athleticism in the senior ranks in tennis tournaments, Greenspan was still at this time “our one and only” top Jewish star. But she would not be so for long. Joel wrote that, “Helen Jacobs, of California, last year’s Girl Champion of the United States is playing fine tennis. She ought to repeat last year’s performance and besides make a high mark in the senior events” (Joel, Jewish Criterion, July 16, 1926, 31). Still, in the meantime, Joel continued to extoll Greenspan talents. In another of his “Jewish Sports Notes” columns, appearing in The Sentinel, he contended that, “Clara Greenspan, our Jewish tennis star, is conspicuous by her inactivity on the courts this spring. I haven’t seen her name in a headline since spring when she was eliminated from a southern tournament” (Joel, June 7, 1929, 13). Moreover, a week later, Joel offered an explanation for Greenspan’s lack of presence on the tennis court for certain competitions. “The Eastern Women’s Singles Championship, which was won by Clara Greenspan last year, is being played without Clara’s aid this year.” Joel observed that she was not competing in this tournament this year because “She is practicing for the Sears Cup matches. She is a member of the team that will represent New York City” (Joel, June 14, 1929, 13).

The prestigious honor of being a member of the Sears Cup Team put Greenspan in the midst of the best amateur women tennis players in her region and the nation. The Sears Cup competition in June 1929 took place in Boston at the Longwood Cricket Club. “Boston Women Win Sears Cup, 6 to 4,” the New York Times declared. “Boston captured three singles and two doubles matches to win the trophy for the third year in succession” (S2). The American Jewish press took pride in identifying one of the New York singles victors as Greenspan. Joel exclaimed that, “Clara Greenspan, number 11 on the women’s singles list, was chosen as a member of the New York team that played the Boston team in Sears Cup matches at Boston.” The New York women lost, he explained, “but through no fault of Clara’s, who accounted for one point with a win against Mrs. H.
R. Guild in straight sets” (“Jewish Sports Notes, June 21, 1929, 44). Greenspan would continue her brilliant tennis career into the 1930s, but she was not the only outstanding American Jewish woman on the tennis court during the decade.

OTHER AMERICAN JEWISH WOMEN TENNIS PLAYERS AND SPORTING EXPERIENCES

In 1931, several American Jewish women joined Greenspan as teammates on the Sears Cup team, competing for the Eastern Lawn Tennis Association versus the New England Association and Middle Atlantic Association teams. These players included Millicent Hirsch, Baroness Levi, and Norma Taubele. The tennis matches for the Sears Cup took place at the Westchester Country Club in Rye, NY, one of the few elite Jewish country clubs in the area (“Nine Women Tennis Players” 40; Levine, “‘Our Crowd at Play’” 172). Several of these American Jewish young women earned the attention of the American Jewish press during the 1930s. While Helen Jacobs, who will be discussed later in the article, excelled in international tournaments at this time, on the home front players like Baroness Giacomo Levi (formerly Maud Rosenbaum before her marriage to the Baron; later often identified by her second husband's name, after divorcing the Baron in 1934 and marrying H. Walter Blumenthal the following year) earned their own victories.

In 1934, Martha Neumark featured the Baroness in the Jewish Criterion and explained that while she “did not get to the finals, she gave clear indication of her superiority in a smashing defeat of Betty Nuthall, the British champion.” Baroness Levi had a long career in tennis as “Chicagoans will remember this firmly-built, dark-completed [sic] thoroughbred as Maud Rosenbaum, daughter of the shoe magnate, whose life has been a continuous success of athletic conquests” and since “her divorce (to the Baron) she has been a familiar figure in the American sport world” (28). Others placed Levi’s career in the context of the “two Helens,” who will be discussed in the next section. “Whenever Helen Wills and Helen Jacobs go to Europe Baroness Giacomo Levi plays phenomenal tennis in this country, cleaning up one tournament after another. Baroness Giacomo Levi looks so Jewish that the ladies who enjoy meeting a real baroness explain: ‘She is a perfect Italian type’” (Biron, “Strictly Confidential,” May 13, 1932, 24). In previewing the US women's tennis championships in 1935 one journalist noted that beside Jacobs, “There will be three
women tennis stars entered . . . Who are Jewish . . . They are Mrs. Blumenthal (the former Baroness Giacomo Levi), Bonnie Miller and Millicent Hirsch” (Weiner, “The Sports World,” August 30, 1935, 12).

In 1935, the *Jewish Exponent*, published in Philadelphia, featured a column “Womankind” by Emma Brylawski, who devoted an article to “Jewish Women in Sports.” Brylawski singled out Baroness Levi, noting that she was the “ranking woman tennis player of the East for the past four years, and holder of about fifteen titles of importance.” Brylawski added that Levi “first gained international acclaim when she overwhelmingly captured the five leading tennis tournaments held along the East coast, in 1932,” propelling her to a top ten standing in the United States. Stressing her gender-role as a mother and the importance of this in her family life as wife of Baron Levi, an Italian Jew, Brylawski praised the baroness for interrupting her tennis competition for a time due to the illness of her daughter. Brylawski praised Levi as “one of the outstanding tennis players in America, and by far the most prominent Jewish woman tennis ace in the world, [who] sacrificed her chances to win one of the most important tournaments in the country in order to be at the beside of her sick daughter” (5). Later, Baroness Levi would return to the tennis courts to compete. Similarly, the *American Hebrew* discussed Baroness Levi and Millicent Hirsch, who earned a number four ranking in the US in 1934 (138). In 1935, the former Baroness Levi (now using the name of her second husband, Blumenthal) defeated fellow Jewish player Norma Taubele at the New York State Singles Championship in 1935. The following year. Taubele defeated Blumenthal in the 1936 finals.

Taubele rose through the junior ranks of tennis to later make her mark on the women’s tennis scene. At times, she played with her mother in women’s doubles events. The *New York Times* indicated, “Miss Taubele Wins with Mother’s Aid” in a tournament in 1927. “Mrs. Rose Taubele and daughter, Miss Norma of New York, advanced to the final round of the women’s doubles of the Eastern clay court tennis championship. The victory of the New York pair was unexpected.” Taubele competed in some of the same tournaments as Clara Greenspan, as a 1929 *New York Times* article informed its readers. Journalist Grover Theis spotlighted Taubele with the headline, “Miss Norma Taubele is Tennis Victor,” and described her athleticism in glowing terms:

> Particularly flaming was Miss Norma Taubele, who is red-haired and left-handed, when she maintained her pace as manifested during the waning season and defeated Miss Beatrice Moore in a fourth round match, 5–7, 6–2, 11–9, in the most strenuously contested match of
As one might expect, players such as Taubele and Levi received special recognition from the American Jewish press for their athleticism on the court. Reviewing “The Sport Year” in 1934, journalist Haskell Cohen noted that even though star Helen Jacobs, “national women’s champ, suffered unexpected defeat twice . . . Baroness Maud Levi, Mrs. Caroline Hirsch and Millicent Hirsch retained their high rankings, the latter winning the national girls’ indoor title” (Cohen 179). Writing about “Jews in the Nation's Sports,” journalist Conzel included women tennis players. In the tennis rankings, behind top-ranked Helen Jacobs in the women’s national singles standing at the fourth rating “was Mrs. H. Walter Blumenthal, the former Baroness Maud Levi, who won the eastern clay court tennis crown, the New York state women’s clay court singles titles and the Women's New Jersey singles championships.” Joining Levi/Blumenthal in high standing were doubles teammates “Miss Millicent Hirsh of New York, former national girls’ singles champion,” and Taubele (“Jews in the Nation's Sports” 161). In 1935 the United States Lawn Tennis Association had Helen Jacobs “ranked number one among women’s tennis player and Mrs. H. W. Blumenthal is placed 11th” (“Jews Gain High National Rankings in Tennis” 7). Vying for top tennis honors in 1936 with Jacobs was Taubele, who “won the New York State singles, the Eastern clay court singles, and with Miss Grace Surber, also a Jewess, captured the New York State doubles, Eastern clay court doubles, and the New Jersey doubles” (Conzel, “Parade of Jewish Champions” 87).

At times, Jewish tennis players, similar to their golf counterparts, faced discrimination in the sport. Levi/Blumenthal claimed such bias in the US Lawn Tennis Association national title tournament in 1936. Charging “deliberate prejudice and discrimination,” she filed a complaint against the tennis committee “as the result of the committee’s failure to place her in the seeded list of the women’s national tennis champions at Forest Hills.” The seeding committee matched Levi/Blumenthal, ranked at the time fifth in the country, against the Helen Jacobs in the first round, although her tennis record and standing merited an easier first round opponent. Blumenthal lost to Jacobs in a tough match, 6–3, 6–4 (“Charges Bias” 8; “Norma Taubele Wins N.Y Women's Tennis Title” 8, quoted in Borish, “Jewish Sportswomen” 95).

During the 1930s Jewish women tennis players in America continued to display their skills. Even at the highest competitive level such as the United States Women’s Tennis Championships, American Jewish women became part
of the highly capable women players competing for laurels. In 1939, a journalist explained, “Norma Taubele, Grace Surber, Millicent Hirsch and Frances Longman comprise a feminine quarter that has earned more than its share of glory. Although none holds a national title, among them they share some twenty-seven junior and women’s divisional championships” (Weiner, “Jewish Athletes Prove Noble Sportsmen” 121).

Some of these American Jewish tennis players continued their athletic triumph on the court. Young tennis prodigy Millicent Hirsch was singled out by the New York Times: “Outplaying her older opponent at every stage, 13-year old Millicent Hirsch of the Bronx easily defeated Miss Vivian Wunderlich 6–3, 6-2” to win the Manhattan junior girl’s singles tennis championship. Hirsch teamed up with her doubles partner to earn the doubles tennis crown, as well (“Net Title to Miss Hirsch” 26). In another tennis tournament featuring young Jewish women players in this summer of 1930, Hirsch outplayed her older Jewish opponent Miss Grace Surber. “Playing an all-around game of unusual polish and astuteness,” the New York Times praised Hirsch’s tennis strategy. “[The] 13-year old New York girl, scored a surprising victory over Miss Grace Surber of Jackson Heights, the top seeded player to reach the finals of the junior girls’ centre tournament of the Eastern Lawn Tennis Association. The hard fought victory by Hirsch was earned by the score of 4–6, 6–1, 6–4” (“Miss Surber Loses in Tennis Upset” 22).

When playing some of the senior Jewish women players Hirsch did not always play victorious tennis. Nonetheless, tennis reporter Danzig praised her in one match by noting, “The compact, gracefully executed strokes of Miss Norma Taubele were pitted against the varied repertoire and stylish backhand of one of the leading junior players in the metropolitan area yesterday in the women’s New York State Championship at the Jackson Heights Tennis Club.” In this tennis event, “All other activity on the court was of secondary interest to the gallery as the 16-year old Millicent Hirsh [sic] of Evander Childs High School fought her way to the front in the first set against Miss Taubele.” In three sets, 4–6, 6–1, 6–3, Taubele defeated Hirsch, “by virtue of her greater experience and lasting powers” (Danzig, “Miss Francis Loses to Miss Greenspan” 23). In the next few years these Jewish women tennis players continued matching their athletic capabilities with all comers, making the “Honor Roll of Jews in Sports—[Jewish Year] 5696” including “Mrs. Maud Blumenthal, Miss Norma Taubele, Grace Surber, Millicent Hirsch” (20). These increasing numbers of female tennis players were celebrated in the Jewish press, but of all the American
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Jewish women who found success on the courts during the inter-war period, one stood above the rest: Helen Hull Jacobs.

HELEN HULL JACOBS AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF TENNIS

Certainly the most renowned Jewish female tennis players of the inter-war period was Helen Hull Jacobs, who won five grand slam titles and was the top ranked women's player in the world in 1936. Jacobs distinguished herself by being a leading advocate for dress reform in tennis during her time as a top player, and she was also one half of a major rivalry in women's tennis with Helen Wills (Moody) in the late 1920s and 1930s. This intense tennis rivalry, discussed below, helped shape the discourse surrounding American women tennis players on the tennis courts—both Jewish and non-Jewish. In fact, Jacobs, in the eyes of the American Jewish press, became known as “our own Helen Jacobs” or more simply, “our Helen,” as compared with “Queen Helen” or “Helen the first,” as Helen Wills was often described. In contrast, the mainstream American press sometimes referred to Jacobs as “Helen the second” and Wills as “Our Helen” due to Wills’ numerous championships and victories over Jacobs. As historian of women’s tennis Larry Engelmann explained, by 1925, “The press was already referring to Jacobs as ‘Little Helen’ and Wills now as ‘Big Helen.’ Jacobs was following in the footsteps of Wills, practicing with Pop Fuller [Wills’ former coach William Fuller] and taking careful instruction from Hazel Wightman,” a leading figure in women’s tennis and former champion (101; Gallico 170–71; Joel, January 28, 1927, 15; Messenger 14).

Jacobs was born August 6, 1908 in Globe, Arizona. Her father, Roland Jacobs, a mining executive of Miami Copper, was Jewish whereas her mother Eula Hull was not. At a young age, the family moved to the San Francisco area where her father became a newspaper advertising executive. He gave Helen her first tennis racket, and she started playing the sport at age thirteen. It was a sport her father, in failing health, could play with her. Jacobs later recollected, “He had two rackets, one of which he gave to me. In the evenings when he came home he and I would walk up to Lafayette Square and, [this is] where he taught me the rudiments of the game.” After she beat her father one day, Jacobs explained, they agreed “that I might try my hand in the public park tournament” (Jacobs, Beyond the Game 16–17, 27, 35). Jacobs spent most of
her childhood in Berkeley, California and her tennis career began in earnest there. In *Beyond the Game: An Autobiography*, she recalled:

I expected to reinforce my success with experience and advice, for I had already been fortunate enough to attract the attention of a well-known figure in California tennis. As early as 1923 William Fuller was gaining widespread reputation as a tennis coach because of his work with Helen Wills. . . . This he did with Helen Wills to whom he threw balls by the boxful, and this he proposed to do with me. (41)

Jacobs played numerous tournaments in Berkeley, earning victories and learning from defeats. She joined the Berkeley Tennis Club as had Helen Wills before her. In 1924, Jacobs traveled with her mother to participate in the National Junior Championships. Jacobs affirmed, “The night that Mr. Fuller telephoned to tell me that I was to leave Berkeley August 7th I could have wept with relief. It infused my hopes and ambitions with reality” (Jacobs, *Beyond the Game* 53–54; Messenger 15). At the age of fifteen Jacobs made her Eastern tennis debut. By then, Wills was too old for junior tennis championships and Jacobs won consecutive junior national tennis titles in 1924 and 1925. Yet, even then, the “two Helens” were starting to become interrelated in the press and in their experiences.

When Jacobs moved from the junior championships to compete in the senior women’s championships her career excelled and so did issues of her form and style on court. The “two Helens” rivalry filled pages of the mainstream American press as well as the American Jewish press. In 1927, *New York Times* sportswriter Danzig touted, “Net Fame Sought By Another Helen. Miss Jacobs Arrives Here from Coast and Starts Practice Matches.” More than this, the journalist described “‘Two Careers Parallel. Both She and Miss Wills Live in Berkeley, Go to Same School and Same Club.’” Danzig informed readers how the two careers “offer a remarkable parallel.” In addition to both living in Berkeley, “Miss Jacobs’s family [is] now occupying the house formerly tenanted by the Wills family; both belong to the same tennis club; both attend the same private school, both have won the national junior girls’ championship twice”; furthermore in the fall, “Miss Jacobs will follow further in the footsteps of her more famous illustrious namesake by matriculating at the University of California” (10). Jacobs revealed at this time, “From the standpoint of tennis as a personal career, 1927 was a year of the greatest importance. I had had a full season of competition in women’s tennis” (Jacobs, *Beyond the Game* 89).
Ten years after that all important year of 1927, Jewish journalist Morris Weiner recalled Jacobs’ role on the women’s tennis circuit in his “Sports Outlook” column in *American Jewish Outlook*. Weiner recalled, “Ever since that day ten years ago in 1927 when as a shy nineteen-year-old-girl she first came out of the West, Helen Jacobs has been a dominant figure on the tennis courts of America and the continent”. Weiner further opined, “And, if consistency is the hallmark of the genuine champion, then Miss Jacobs, who derives her Jewishness from her father (who died recently), is a reigning queen in the fullest sense of the expression.” He explained that her triumphs at various tennis contests placed her among the greatest women’s tennis players during the golden age in the 1920s and 1930s:

Of all the women who have played tennis in the half century that they have been granted championship recognition, four alone have commanded universal attention usually reserved for men athletes. Dynamic Suzanne Lenglen, the French Pavlawa of the courts was one. The brilliant Molla Mallory was another. Poker faced Helen Wills Moody and Helen Jacobs are the other two . . . And, if not for the fact that she [Jacobs] was a contemporary of the great Helen Wills, she would have sat in triumph in all the throne rooms of tennis long ago. (“Sports Outlook” 16)

Weiner highlighted the various top women tennis players against whom Jacobs competed, and noted again the place of rival Helen Wills. “The Jewish girl made her debut in tournament tennis in 1926, at a time when competition among American women never was keener. Miss Helen Wills, fresh from a triumph over the glamorous Lenglen, ruled despotically and showed not the slightest inclination of relaxing her grip on her titles. Mrs. Mallory, a top-notcher for a decade still possessed the inherent class which carried her to the national championship that year, eleven years after her first victory” (Weiner, “Sports Outlook” 16). Despite the presence of such amazing female tennis players, Jacobs, indeed, gained impressive victories on court. She won the United States National Championships in Singles from 1932 to 1935, won the United States Women’s Doubles Championship in 1932, and 1934–35, the Mixed Doubles Champion in 1934, and earned the prestigious Wimbledon Ladies Championship in 1936. Jacobs also represented the US in women’s international tennis competitions on the Wightman Cup as a Team Member in 1927–37 and 1939. Yet, despite these triumphs, the popular focus of the public on her career always seemed to come back to the rivalry with Helen Wills.
The spotlight on Jacobs’ rivalry with Wills shaped the commentary in the American mainstream and American Jewish press throughout her career. Being an American Jewish female athlete, as Joel asserted, “Our Helen was National Girls’ Champion a few years back, and she has developed into a well rounded player. A few more years of experience and she’ll beat anybody in the East” (“Jewish Sports Notes,” January 28, 1927, 15). In fact, Joel praised Jacobs’ talent on court as she moved into the senior ranks of women’s competitive tennis. He remarked about this 1927 national tennis championship, “only one Jewish girl can be found among the entries. Of course it is Helen Jacobs, and she has won her way into the third round. Unfortunately,” Joel explained, Helen “is in the same side of the draw with Helen Wills, and hence it is highly improbable that the Jewish girl will be a finalist” (“Jewish Sports Notes,” September 2, 1927, 29). Jacobs, in becoming a national star, who, unlike some of the other American Jewish women, advanced beyond the New York and California state tournaments to reach the US women’s national tournament and also played in international tournaments, quickly gained high praise. Joel ascertained earlier in 1928 that in the realm of Jews in sport, “In the women’s list our own Helen Jacobs was ranked No. 1. Helen Wills is, of course, the best player on the West Coast, or any other coast for that matter, but due to her illness was not ranked this year. Our Helen was National Girls’ Champion a few years back, and has developed into a well rounded player” (“Jewish Sports Notes,” Jan. 28, 1927, 15). Noting the frequency of these tennis talents competing against each other over the years, one journalist in the Jewish Criterion offered that the similarity in their geographic and personal path in tennis should not be an overriding theme. “The mere fact that Both Mrs. [Wills] Moody [married to Frederick S. Moody and therefore often identified with her married surname] and Helen Jacobs hail from Berkeley, Cal.,” the author declared, “is no reason for any one referring to them as a couple of Berkeley Belles,” putting gendering terminology ahead of tennis skill (“Notes of Interest” 21).

The tennis matches between Jacobs and Wills (Moody) were dominated by Wills for most of the span of their rivalry. Their eighth match, however, became one for the ages. As one writer described it, “The Jacobs-Wills rivalry was said to dominate women’s tennis as complete as the rivalry between Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots once dominated British politics. Jacobs and Wills met each other eight times, and seven times Wills walked away victorious.” But in the eighth contest, “Wills simply walked off the court, defaulted the Forest Hills finals of 1933 to a startled and deeply disappointed Jacobs, 8–6, 3-6, 3-0” (Messenger 15; “Sport,” Newsweek 18). Wills’ withdrawal
occurred after she claimed a back injury, and the controversial contest, which gave Jacobs her second of four US championship titles (she won her first in 1932 against Carolin Babcock), helps reveal how American Jewish periodicals viewed and understood “Our Helen” in the 1930s.

THE “TWO HELENS” AND POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN TENNIS STARS

As Helen Jacobs gained acclaim by winning tournaments and as Helen Wills continued to show her tennis prowess, the two remained linked in the tennis world. In the early years of the rivalry, as mentioned above, Jacobs was on the losing end of a number of matches to Wills, who, due to her cool and controlled demeanor on the court, was nicknamed “The Ice Queen” and “Little Miss Poker Face” as the press assigned different skills and personalities to the two tennis stars. According to renowned sportswriter Paul Gallico, Wills “had the reputation as well as appearance of being completely glacial, unemotional and implacable, and yet I, in the company of a few other sportswriters once saw an almost incredible Helen Wills with her hair down.” Gallico lauded Wills
as having “the courage of a lioness, the stoicism of an Indian brave, and the beauty of a Greek goddess” (168–69). Another journalist explained that, “Miss Wills made it unbearable by jealously guarding her laurels and acting condescendingly. In recent years, making her annual rankings, she has carefully rated Miss Jacobs obscurely. Miss Jacobs ‘hated her “second fiddle” role’” (“Sport,” Newsweek 18).

In contrast, some journalists described Jacobs’ tennis style and demeanor as countering that of Wills. Noting she was a new player in the international competition of the US versus England in the Wightman Cup in 1927, Joel observed in the Jewish Criterion, “Helen Jacobs’ first appearance as a member of the American team in the Wightman Cup Matches resulted in her defeat by sixteen year-old Betty Nuthall of England. . . . Miss Jacobs is still in the process of developing. She has the pace and strength for the game, but needs the seasoning that comes from constant campaigning.” He further explained Jacobs’ importance:

There is only one star woman Jewish player in the country, but she makes up in quality what we lack in quantity. Helen Jacobs was a member of the American Wightman Cup team, and has a victory over Molla Mallory, the 1926 singles champion. Helen is sure of a ranking among the first five. Miss Jacobs is the first Jewish woman in America to gain a place in the tennis sun. (“The Year in Sports,” September 19, 1927, 368)

Yet when Wills defeated Jacobs in the 1928 Women’s National Single Championship at Forest Hills, Joel commented on Jacobs’ defeat as well as her character, in contrast to Wills. “Our Helen was just not in Wills’ class and I don’t think she will be for a long time” after a 6–2, 6– loss. “On the other hand,” Joel declared, “Helen Jacobs is a delight to watch. She makes wry faces, smiles at the good ones, gesticulates and chases a ball as though her life depended on it. She takes her tennis very seriously and when she loses a little crying in the club house is not unusual” (“Jewish Sports Notes,” Sept. 7, 1928, 16A). Journalist Danzig hailed the victory of Wills as she soundly defeated Jacobs. “The most devastating power ever applied to a tennis ball by a woman . . . carried Miss Helen Wills, twenty-three year-old Berkeley (Cal.) girl, to her fifth national championship yesterday, bringing to a close the campaign that has seen her win the premier laurels of tennis at Auteuil, Wimbledon, and Forest Hills without the loss of a set in three months of play” (Danzig, “Miss Wills Retains National Net Crown” 26). Sportswriter Westbrook Pegler in the Chicago Daily
Tribune announced, “Miss Wills Wins Battle of the Helens; Retains Title” (17). Thanks to this kind of journalistic rhetoric, the two Helens certainly became pitted in the press as well as on the tennis court.

In her own recollection of competing against the great women’s champions, Jacobs wrote in Gallery of Champions (1949) on this first meeting with Wills in the national championship singles, “Although a recapitulation of the match showed that I earned more points than she, her errors were negligible in comparison with mine, as I overhit the lines in an effort to match her length.” Jacobs explained that to play Wills “was to play a machine. There was little, if any conversation, no joviality, and to this the gallery reacted, becoming grim in its partnership.” Of note, Jacobs admitted, “The press had long since confused incompatibility with the elements of a ‘feud’ in our matches, which became less agreeable to both of us as they inevitably occurred” (25–26). In short, the press deemed these Wills versus Jacobs tennis contests as a “cat fight” (Engelmann 339). Yet earlier in her tennis career, the press described Jacobs as “Speedy Afoot” and “Needs Competition to Develop Into a Great Star.” A Washington Post article asked, “Will Helen Jacobs develop into an as great a tennis player as Helen Wills?” (“Miss Jacobs Is Speedy Afoot” 19). Her partner for the 1934 United States Mixed Doubles Championship, George Lott, commented that she “got the furthest with the leastest. [sic] To be exact, she had a forehand chop, a sound backhand, and lots and lots of stomach muscles” (Messenger 15).

The controversial match between Jacobs and Wills in the 1933 United States National Women’s Singles Championship was played into the third set before Wills quit. A Los Angeles Times story summarized the way the championship match ended: “Mrs. Moody Defaults. Helen Jacobs Triumphs. Trailing by Three Games in the Third and Deciding Set, Net Queen Withdraws.” Journalist Alan Gould quoted Wills on the match as offering, “‘I Felt as if I Were Going to Faint’, Says Star; Passes Up Doubles.” Gould wrote in his coverage of this highly anticipated battle between Jacobs and Wills Moody, “Facing apparently certain defeat since 1926 in singles competition and on the verge of collapse, the result of wearing a back brace that troubled her right hip and leg. Mrs. Moody defaulted to Miss Jacobs after losing the first three games of the final set. The scores of the match that were hard fought and often brilliant, for two sets were 8–6, 3–6, 3-0, default.” The 7,000 spectators watching the tennis match understandably were disappointed, but they “accorded an ovation to Miss Jacobs, who rose to her greatest heights by outplaying Mrs. Moody for the first time in her career and capturing the national championship for the second consecutive year” (Gould 1). Noting that Jacobs, who previously was “always
merely ‘Helen the Second,’ deserved the full fruits of a gallantly won triumph. From the outset,” Gould revealed that Jacobs “played with a determination and a resourcefulness that soon made it certain the seven-time former champion was in for a battle of her life, under any circumstance” (Gould, 1, Pt. 4).

*Newsweek* magazine recorded the momentous match with the tennis headline: “Mrs. Moody Quits Game in Dramatic Default.” In this amazing sports moment, *Newsweek* reported that Wills/Moody did not faint; “Instead she picked up her famous blue sweater, told the umpire. Ben Wright, her legs wouldn’t work, defaulted, and slowly left the stadium. Thus Miss Jacobs herself reported to be suffering from heart trouble became the new ‘Queen’ of tennis.” The thousands of spectators believed Wills Moody should have played out the “final set even if she just let the balls whiz by. Some said that Mrs. [Wills] Moody, near defeat for the first time since 1926, had forgotten how to lose graciously.” Furthermore, observers offered, “Those who termed Mrs. Moody’s conduct ‘inexcusable’ explained it by recalling the feud that has long existed between the two California Helens” (“Sport,” *Newsweek* 18).

Prior to this famed match, Jacobs recalled that she incurred an injury during the 1933 tennis season and that this might adversely affect her play in pursuit of the US National women’s tennis title. After Jacobs’s quarter-final match her doctor began “to pray for rain. I had aggravated the debilitating trouble in my side at Wimbledon and Seabright [tennis tournaments], where I played in heavy rain, and I needed a rest before my semi-final round against Dorothy Round.” Jacobs acknowledged, “The drastic measures suggested by a specialist in Boston were not feasible until the tournament was over. Rest did not seem possible until it began to rain the morning of my scheduled match against Dorothy.” The delay of matches helped Jacobs improve her health. “The five days respite were a joy to me.” She recollected, “Noah could not have been happier to see the sun than I was when it finally reappeared.” Jacobs, now rested and ready to play Dorothy Round was also “eager . . . to play Helen Moody” in the finals, as the winner of this semi-final match would gain the opportunity to do (Jacobs, *Beyond the Game* 166–67).

Jacobs triumphed in her match against Round to play in the final she won by default over Helen Wills Moody. In later years, sports writer Gallico discussed the contentious finish to the match and recalled that another Golden Age of Tennis star, “Big Bill” Tilden, stated that, “when Mrs. Moody [Wills] defaulted, Helen Jacobs, meeting her at the umpires stand . . . put her hand on her shoulder and said—‘Won’t you rest a minute, Helen?’ Miss Wills coldly replied, ‘Take your hand off my shoulder’, picked up her racquets and left the court”
(Gallico 175). On the default by her rival, Jacobs explained, “‘Mrs. Moody Did Right.’ She refuted the claims of the “cat fight” between the two tennis rivals. “Dissipating reports that of a personal feud with Mrs. Moody, Miss Jacobs emphatically said regarding her opponent and fellow Californian: ‘I do like her. Because you are not a very great friend of some one [sic] it doesn’t necessarily follow that you are not friendly” (25).

HELEN HULL JACOBS AND HER INFLUENCE ON TENNIS
In the 1930s, especially following her victory over Wills in 1933, Jacobs received plaudits in the American press. She was named the Associated Press “Outstanding Woman Performer” in 1933 and in a headline about the voting, the Atlanta Constitution stated, “Helen Jacobs Leads Women Athletic Stars. Tennis Champion Voted Best” (see also “Helen Jacobs Tops Nation’s Athletic Poll). The article noted that she surpassed women’s national golf champion Virginia Van Wie, and the Associated Press sports poll named this “former crown princess of tennis as the queen of sports for 1933” (10). The American Jewish press proudly reported on Jacobs’ success as well in 1934, when she “has been listed as American’s No. 1 racquet woman and had the pleasure of turning down an offer of $20,000 to turn professional,” in order to remain an amateur and compete in women’s tournaments (Biron, “Strictly Confidential,” January 13, 1935, 14).

In 1935, a full column for “Who’s Who in Women’s Tennis” in the Chicago Tribune was devoted to Jacobs and included a recent defeat in another closely contested match with Wills at Wimbledon. The column reported that Jacobs missed winning the famed Wimbledon championship “by an inch.” In this match, “after an exchange of shots Miss Jacobs leaped into the air and hit a well placed over-head smash which would have swept her opponent from the court, but luck intervened, the ball hit the top of the net, and bounded back into the court.” In assessing this title match between the two Helens, the reporter informed readers, “To lose by an inch of winning the most coveted tennis title in all the world would have caused the average contender many a heartache, but Miss Jacobs met it with a smile” (“Who’s Who in Women’s Tennis” 18). In an American Jewish periodical the match also received attention. In “Jews in the Nation’s Sports,” columnist Conzel declared, “Among Jewish women players Helen Jacobs, of course, dominated the field. Although she lost to her
arch-rival Mrs. Helen Wills Moody, in the finals of the all-England women's singles tennis champions when the latter made a last minute rally, Miss Jacobs,” Conzel pointed out, “went on to retain her American national singles title” (“Jews in the Nation’s Sports” 98). On her loss to Wills Moody, Jacobs revealed, “It was useless after the match to wonder what I should have done, and all-important to put it out of my mind and concentrate on the American season” (Jacobs, Beyond the Game 264). Although she did not win Wimbledon in 1935, Jacobs was awarded an honorary membership to the Wimbledon England Tennis Club, the first time a non-Wimbledon champion had gained this honor (“Honors Helen Jacobs” 2).

The following year, Jacobs finally triumphed at Wimbledon. Winning the tournament “after 8 years of trying,” gave Jacobs great pride as she “succeeded to the title of Mrs. Helen Wills Moody on the Wimbledon greens this afternoon after a dogged tooth and nail battle.” Significantly, in a time of Nazi ascendancy and in the same year as the Berlin Olympics, she defeated Hilda Sperling of Denmark, born in Germany, 6–2, 4-6, 7–5, yet residing in Denmark. In her victory, Jacobs, “a strong, attractive figure in shorts, on the green courts, kept the Wimbledon title in the American family” (“Helen Jacobs Wins English Tennis Crown” A9).

*Time* magazine featured Jacobs on the cover for September 14, 1936. The cover caption read “Helen Hull Jacobs. Where there Isn’t a Wills, there’s a way . . .” The caption again referred to the longstanding rivalry between these two Helens as “The rivalry between these two girls [that] grew from the courts to the newspapers.” Moreover, the article continued, “This year Helen Wills Moody was not in the tournament and Helen Jacobs at last found her way to her first Wimbledon title.” In the same article, *Time* remarked, “As No.1 tennisist, Helen Jacobs has a game marked less by brilliance of speed or stroke than by steadiness and tactical skill. Her most dependable stroke is a forehand slice, taught her by Tilden” (“Sport, *Time* cover and 36–45).

After the unnamed author continued describing other of her qualities on the court, he then felt further constrained to note that “Helen Jacobs is not a Jew” (“Sport,” *Time* cover, 38, 40). It is unclear why the author felt the need to put this in, although, strictly speaking, he might be said to have a point. That is, if one were to define her identity in accordance with longstanding rabbinical tradition, then one could argue that, since she was not born of a Jewish mother, she was not Jewish from the perspective of more orthodox traditions. But since one of the hallmarks of modern Jewish identity is the right to choose one’s identity, and Jacobs became identified as Jewish and apparently also identified
herself as Jewish, the writer’s qualification may have been motivated more by anti-Semitism, reflecting a desire not to allow this tennis champion the right to be identified as having a specifically Jewish heritage. In contrast, such attitudes and statements may have been why the American Jewish press preferred to ignore such technicalities and so eagerly accepted Jacobs as its “own” Helen.

Following her victory over Wills at the 1933 US Championship, a reporter from the *Jewish Criterion* lauded Jacobs’ tennis victory but also wanted to reaffirm her Jewish identity. “We offer a five dollar book to anybody who will supply us with authoritative information on the Jewish-ness of Helen Jacobs, the tennis star.” The reporter conveyed, “Personally we do believe that she is the daughter of a Jewish advertising man of California (Biron, “Strictly Confidential,” September 15, 1933, 63). Three years later, American Jewish periodicals hailed Jacobs’ victory at Wimbledon. In “Jewish Champions Hold Spotlight in Almost Every Field of Sport,” Irv Kupcinet in the *Jewish Advocate*, asserted about tennis that, “No sport produced more Jewish champions last year. . . . Helen Jacobs reached her life’s ambition when she finally won the Wimbledon title, defeating Hilda Sperling of Germany, 6–2, 4–6, 7–5. In doing so, Jacobs became “the best woman player of the world.” He noted other American Jewish women stars in the sport of tennis such as Norma Taubele (“Jewish Champions Hold Spotlight” 25, 27, 29). In the “Jewish Sports Champions on Parade” piece in the *Jewish Advocate* the following year, once again Jacobs received accolades. Morris Weiner pronounced, “When speaking of tennis the name of Helen Jacobs still comes first for amateur honors in America, followed closely by Norma Taubele, Grace Surber, and Baroness Maude Levi” (Weiner, “Jewish Sports Champions on Parade” 27).

Another impact of Helen Hull Jacobs in tennis involves her activism in support of dress reform in the sport. Jacobs advocated for, and wore, shorts in tennis matches in the late 1920s and early 1930s, at a time when short skirts were just making their initial appearance in women tennis. Jacobs wrote about her quest to wear tennis clothing promoting freedom of movement on court in her chapter titled: “A ‘Short’ and Long Problem” in her autobiography, *Beyond the Game* (173–76). In 1929, the *New York Times* claimed, “U. S. Women Tennis Stars Plan to Adopt Stockingless Mode in Play at Wimbledon,” and that year, Jacobs arrived at Wimbledon, and with a few other English players, declared “their intention of not being ‘handicapped’ by hose in this year’s international competition at this famous English stadium.” Specifically, Jacobs asserted, “This stocking business is merely a question of comfort and freedom on the courts.” She continued, “In California this year nearly everybody played
without stockings and it undoubtedly helps one’s game. At Wimbledon I shall not wear stockings” (37). She seemed to have worn shorts only in practice, however, rather than an official match at the time. Four years later though, at the US National Women’s Championships that she eventually won after Wills withdrew from the title match, Jacobs paved the way in women’s tennis by wearing shorts. “Helen Jacobs Makes Debuts in ‘Scanties’. National Tennis Champion Dons Shorts Today for First Time in Public Appearance.” At this tournament, Jacobs planned her “debut in shorts. She’s been wearing ‘em in practice several days and tomorrow, if the sun shines, she will begin the defense of her title in the scantiest attire ever worn by a queen of American tennis.” Jacobs asserted her right to wear the new tennis costume:

They’re really a tremendous advantage . . . . Nothing but prejudice has been preventing us for years. I know they improve my game and all the other girls say the same. I know I’ve lost many points through my racket catching in my skirt. Not only that, but they’re cooler and enable one to get around so much faster, particularly in the latter stages of a hard match. (A9)

Male tennis officials did not publicly object to the new trends in tennis attire, and Jacobs donned the new tennis fashion at Wimbledon in 1934 following the advice of a male tennis player. “She achieved the goal of all young female notables by establishing a fashion in clothes. This was when Bunny [Henry] Austin advised her to play tennis in shorts,” and she did so. Jacobs wore shorts “in the presence of Queen Mary at Wimbledon in 1934.” Her tennis style gained publicity. “Her shorts, more becoming than the Wills’ eye-shade and longer than those worn by most girl tennists, were made for her by a London men’s tailor.” Time magazine noted that Jacobs “still gets them from him, demands for fittings to a pair,” not positively endorsing this pioneering tennis costume for women (“Sport,” Time 40). A Jewish journalist highlighted the influence of Jacobs on other young women racket sport players during the 1936 period, a time of tension with Jews about participation in the Nazi Olympics. Irv Kupcinet in “The World of Sport,” published in the Nashville Observer, praised her by noting, “It’s not very often that a Jewish lassie causes any whoop-de-do on the athletic scene. Helen Hull Jacobs, the glorious girl from equally glorious California, is one, but aside from the wizard of the net, how many others are there?” (8).

As her career drew to a close, Jacobs played Wills once again in a tournament final, this time at Wimbledon in 1938. Jacobs was injured and lost the
match easily. But contrary to her opponent’s behavior in 1933, the press lauded what was perceived as Jacobs’ sportsmanship and respect for the game. “Jacobs had torn the sheath of her Achilles tendon with the score tied 4–4 in the first set, but she refused to default. Hazel Wightman, tennis star of an earlier era, came down out of the stands to urge her to give up, but Jacobs insisted she wouldn’t leave the court until the match was over” (Messenger 15).

Jacobs not only received coverage in the media, but she also became part of a book celebrating the exploits of various American Jewish women. In a review of *Little Women Grow Bold* (1936), authored by Mary Elizabeth Ford, the reviewer explained that the book covered the past accomplishments of women, including those who excelled in sport. The book portrayed “this record of bold and brave ladies of might and brawn” giving mention “to Helen Jacobs in tennis, Elaine Rosenthal in golf and Mrs. Oscar Straus in exploration. The best proof of the emergence of Jewish women in sports is the fact that so few women are mentioned in this book, which deals, mostly with has-beens,” with the present period showing more American Jewish women participating in sports (Mann 15). Ford praised the tennis proficiency of Jacobs and once again identified the intense competition and rivalry between the “two Helens.” The author expressed the sentiment that “more pronounced than ever” there was a “yearning for some new heroine to come forward and overpower the imperial Helen [Wills].” And in that feat Helen Jacobs showed her mettle. Reminding readers of the famous match in 1933 when Wills defaulted rather than finish the match, “Suddenly there was a dramatic pause! Queen Helen instead of changing courts walked to the stand, steely-faced as ever. ‘I default.’” The impact for Jewish young women and girls observing this proved noteworthy. “The important thing was that at last the world of women’s tennis had a new conqueror. Her name was Helen Jacobs and she appeared, like a spirit of the nineties—short shorts.” Jacobs was characterized by Ford as a genuine heroine, who “was the best in a sport that was thought more entertaining to watch when played by women than men” (Ford 139–41).

Jacobs appeared in two more US championship finals, losing both to Alice Marble, but she continued to influence tennis. She played into the early 1940s, wrote numerous books and contributed articles to the press. Jacobs was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1962 in recognition of her tennis achievements.

Of course, the presence and importance of American Jewish women in tennis goes well beyond the achievements of Helen Hull Jacobs, as this study has shown. At a time when American women in general confronted
discrimination in sports (and the broader society) these Jewish women competed and succeeded for themselves and as representatives for all Americans to admire, Jews and non-Jews alike. The American Jewish women players on court in the 1920s and 1930s left an indelible imprint on sports, in particular, and American society more generally. As Joel pointed out, “The prowess of women athletics has become a thing to be expected. Women of today are performing feats of strength, endurance and skill that rival the achievements of the man” (Joel, “Jewish Sports Notes,” August 27, 1926, 5). Undoubtedly American Jewish women tennis players formed a significant part of the American Jewish women’s expanded participation in sport in American culture. In doing so, they changed perceptions and belied stereotypes both among their fellow Jews and in all areas of American culture as well. They not only appreciably helped change how Jews were perceived but how women—whether Jewish or not—should be seen as a force of athletic prowess, and thus to be reckoned with in American sporting heritage.
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