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VIEW

BERLIN MACCABI GAMES CALLED A TRIUMPH OF GOOD OVER EVIL

By Paul Lungen & Alex Davis - July 29, 2015 > 4110 > 0



When 2,300 Jewish athletes, coaches and officials marched into Waldbuhne Stadium in Berlin, it marked not only the first time the European Maccabi Games were held in Germany, it also signaled a triumph over the genocidal policies of Adolf Hitler.

That message was clear to the 20-strong Canadian delegation that marched into the stadium and past the viewing stands where Hitler greeted athletes at the 1936 Olympic Games.

"It is very meaningful for us to be here," said Tali Dubrovsky, national executive director of Maccabi Canada. "We're going to walk by the place where Hitler sat...and did not allow Jewish athletes...and it's meaningful for us to do so after so many years."



Jeremy Freedman stands with the flag outside Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

The Canadian participants were led into the stadium by flag bearer Jeremy Freedman. Freedman competed in golf at the 2005 Maccabiah Games in Israel and again in 2013. He has been active in the Maccabi movement since 2005.

Freedman had no desire to visit Germany, given its historic treatment of the Jews, but when he learned the opening ceremonies would be held in the same stadium as the 1936 Olympics, he got on board.

"I was not prepared to miss this moment," he said by phone from the marshaling grounds in Olympic Park adjacent to the stadium just before the athletes' marched in.

"I am both honoured and humbled by the opportunity to carry the Canadian flag into the Olympic Stadium on behalf of our delegation. As Canadians, we intend to stand tall alongside our Jewish brothers and sisters from all of the participating nations. I am so grateful that Maccabi keeps bringing us together to promote Jewish identity through our shared passion for sports," he said.

Prior to the opening ceremonies, the German minister of justice addressed participants and "spoke beautifully" about Germany's zero tolerance for anti-Semitism, Freedman said.

And 93-year-old Holocaust survivor Margot Friedlander, who was born in Germany and had been an accomplished athlete in her youth until Nazi policies forbade her from competing, also addressed the participants. That memorial service was particular moving, Freedman said.

"I would like to ask you to take part ... in memory of my brother and all other athletes who did not survive," said Friedlander, whose brother Ralph, was killed in Auschwitz.

The spirit of the games "stands for tolerance, being open to the world, and for a peaceful living together, and there is no better place to send this message into the world than here, 70 years after the war," she said.

The memorial service reinforced the message that "it is important for us as Jews to be here, that we can compete here again," Freedman said.

The choice of Berlin as this year's host city reflects a remarkable turn for the nation once at the centre of the worst judeocide in history. Germany's Jewish population is currently the fastest growing in Europe, totaling 250,000 people according to liberal estimates, and Germany is keen to support the Games. A number of high profile German politicians and athletes have offered their full backing, with patrons including German President Joachim Gauck and German national team soccer player Jérôme Boateng.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel greeted athletes with a note in the evening's program that stated, "In view of the past, Germany may truly be thankful for the restored diversity of Jewish life in our country and for the renewed trust of the guests from abroad."

World Jewish Congress (WJC) President Ronald S. Lauder told Jewish athletes at the Games that holding the competition in Berlin represented "a triumph of good over evil.

"Here we are, 70 years since the concentration camps were liberated and the true horror of the Nazis was realized, at the stadium Hitler built, to celebrate the Jewish European Maccabi Games," Lauder said at a reception prior to the opening ceremonies.

Lauder thanked Maccabi Germany, Maccabi Europe and the German government for organizing the Games: "For those who say this is not the right place to hold these Games, I say, to the contrary, this is exactly where these Games should be held. This place, this stadium, is where these Games should be held. It is said that the best way to overcome a terrible event is to go back to where it happened, to show yourself that you can return, and to prove to everyone that you can endure and move on."

Great Britain's Maccabi team delegation Lord Jonathan Kestenbaum echoed those thoughts.

"Our athletes will be making both memories and history this summer. As we know, there were many people who were affected by the Shoah. However, there were also many who survived," Kestenbaum said.

"Those who did could have been forgiven for turning away from life itself. From their faith, from their God or their people. Instead they chose to keep their faith, build their lives and their communities and this should inspire us all to do the same," he said.

"The opening ceremony of the European Maccabi Games, will be the place for us to make our pledge to affirm life, continue to build our Jewish Community and be a source of pride to our people and the world."

What is also significant is not just that the games are being held in Germany but also against a backdrop of rising anti-Semitism across Europe.

Over the past year or so, Jews have been murdered in Paris and Copenhagen, synagogues being firebombed and there has been a rise in Jewish emigration. Populist nationalism has revived the far right through groups like Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary. Even in the U.K., traditionally one of the most tolerant European nations, the number of anti-Semitic attacks doubled in 2014.

It is a sad state of affairs, but European Jewry is far from lost.

Europe's political leaders have stepped up the fight and have rightly been praised for their strong stances on anti-Semitism. Manuel Valls, the French prime minister, has been at the forefront of such efforts. Following January's massacre at a kosher supermarket in Paris, Valls insisted if France's Jews felt compelled to flee, the very heart of the French Republic was threatened.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has added he would be "heartbroken" if British Jewry packed up and left. Whether or not emotive rhetoric is transpiring into decisive political action is debatable, but Jewish fears are not being ignored.

France is a case in point. Approximately 500,000 Jews live in France, about three-quarters of them in Paris. Last year, 7,086 French Jews emigrated to Israel- more than triple the 2012 figure - partly due to a stagnant economy, but also because of a spike in anti-Semitic incidents. In 2012, a jihadist murdered four Jews at a school in Toulouse. Last January, a gunman held shoppers hostage inside a kosher supermarket on the eastern edge of Paris. Thousands of French Jews have been harassed, threatened and physically assaulted and many have, understandably, had enough.

But the majority are staying put. In France, the building of a new \$11 million (US), 45,000-square foot Jewish cultural centre at the heart of the heavily Jewish 17th arrondissement of Paris is testament to the confidence and vitality of the community. Last month, French President Francois Hollande said the new cultural centre is "the best answer to those who think that the future of the Jews of France is elsewhere." Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo added that for her the centre formed part of a determination to "make not only France but all of Europe a place where Jews continue to feel comfortable to live."

It's a trend matched elsewhere on the continent. Budapest, which houses Central Europe's largest Jewish population, has seen a 35 per cent increase in participation at its main Jewish Community Centre. In the Hungarian countryside, the JDC-Lauder International Jewish Summer Camp at Szarvas expanded to a fourth session this year to accommodate almost 2,000 campers and counsellors. The camp's director, Sasha Friedman, describes European Jewish life as "brimming with possibility." New Jewish nursery schools have opened in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia and Romania. Cultural Jewish life is far from dead.

It is the unity and ongoing resilience of the European Jewish community, in conjunction with increasing governmental support in tackling anti-Semitism, which demonstrates why the continent will not be saying goodbye to its anytime soon.

The first European Maccabi Games were held in Prague in 1929, but soon after, with the rise of Nazism Jewish sports associations were banned. The games - open to anyone with at least one Jewish parent or grandparent - were reinstated in 1969 and are held every four years, alternating with the Maccabiah Games in Israel.