

Author recalls those who stepped up to the plate Larry Ruttman's new book analyzes Jews' impact on the game of baseball

By Alexandra Lapkin

Advocate Staff

Larry Ruttman, an avid baseball fan, had many questions that he wanted to ask his Jewish hardball heroes for years.

Although proudly identifying as Jewish, Ruttman ended his religious observance after his bar mitzvah, replacing Judaism with his true religion: baseball.

"I went to learn my Torah part, but I was out there playing ball every day," he said.

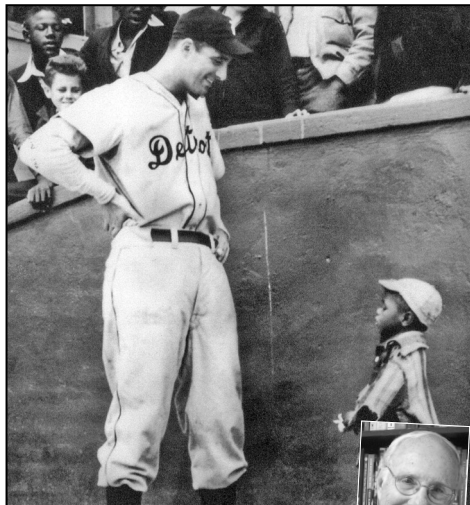
Ruttman's dream to talk to the game's power players finally came true in 2007, when he began collecting interviews for what would become "American Jews and America's Game," his second book, which came out this month.

The 82-year-old Ruttman enjoyed a successful law career before he got his second wind and decided to become a writer. A lifelong Brookline resident, his first book was "Voices of Brookline," which features interviews of the town's notable residents.

Ruttman came up with the idea for the new book when he traveled to Israel for the launch of the Israel Baseball League (IBL). Although the league ended that same year, he had a chance to meet the team managers, some of the most successful Jewish former major league players, including Ken Holtzman, Art Shamsky and Steve Hertz.

Marty Appel, Ruttman's publicist, connected him with those baseball veterans in Israel. Appel, who had been a public relations director for the New York Yankees in the 1970s, was hired to do PR for the IBL. The youngest publicist in major league baseball history and an author of about 20 books on baseball, Appel himself is a notable figure in baseball, and Ruttman did not miss an opportunity to interview him as well.

Ruttman's idea for the book was to feature Jews who are involved in baseball, "whether they are players or people in the front office,"



Hank Greenberg (above) is one of numerous figures who factor into the new book "American Jews and America's Game" by Larry Ruttman (inset).

Ruttman said. He also did not forget the fans, from the likes of then-U.S. Rep. Barney Frank to renowned lawyer Alan Dershowitz, to writers such as Murray Chass and Ira Berkow, both known for their sports coverage at The New York Times. Others interviewed included team owners such as the Chicago White Sox's Jerry Reinsdorf, and scores of other key figures in baseball.

"What I sought to do in this book," Ruttman said, "was go beyond the usual book on baseball and Jews ... they seem to stick mostly to batting averages and things on the field ... I really wanted to find out about the whole canon ... of Jewish people involved in the game of baseball ... speaking to them would really illuminate American experience, seen through the eyes of people involved in baseball."

In the book, he added, baseball serves as only a "backdrop" for "an oral history of American Jewish life over the last 80 years ... it's really a story of America and American

Judaism."

Since Ruttman was more interested in what happened behind the scenes, he asked about his subjects' upbringing and their relationship with Judaism, whether they experienced any anti-Semitism from their teammates, whether their families were assimilated, how they feel about Israel, and how they identify as Jews.

After he came back from Israel, Ruttman spent several years crisscrossing the country in search of answers. In Brentwood, Calif., he met with Thelma "Tiby" Eisen and Anita Foss, who played in the All-American

Girls Professional Baseball League in the 1940s.

Eisen and Foss considered themselves feminists before women's liberation was even a movement.

"They left home, did what they wanted, played ball," Ruttman noted, at a time when women were not expected to do what they want, much less play professional sports.

Through the players' relationships with their Jewish identity, Ruttman traced the trajectory of anti-Semitism in the United States, from its presence in the baseball parks and locker rooms, to the decline of its overt expression. For instance, in the 1930s and 1940s, the idea of an exceptional Jewish professional athlete was still unique enough to grant Hank Greenberg the nickname "The Hebrew Hammer."

Although there were Jews in baseball before Greenberg, he made his mark as arguably the most famous Jewish athlete, and in Ruttman's words, "without question, the greatest Jewish position player ever." Greenberg played for the Detroit Tigers, and was one of the best power hitters of the 1930s and 1940s.

Greenberg grew up in the home of Eastern European Orthodox Jews, but he abandoned religious observance and "gave his three chil-

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dren practically no hint of their Jewish heritage,” according to Ruttman. He tried to piece together Greenberg’s attitude toward his Jewish identity by speaking with his children, Steve and Alva, who gradually returned to

Judaism as adults.

While many players in the early 1900s changed their names and attempted to hide their Jewish identity – or, in the case of Greenberg, disavowed Judaism – Ruttman cited a trend in recent years of more openness and pride in Judaism in baseball, and elsewhere

in the public arena.

“Jews are much more accepted in American society now,” Ruttman said. “And I think the same goes in baseball.”

Ruttman will read from his new book Thursday, April 18, at 5 p.m. at the Brookline Main Library, 361 Washington St., Brookline.

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