Spring 2013

American Jews and America's Game

Larry Ruttman

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American Jews & America’s Game
The Elysian Fields, Hoboken, New Jersey, the site of the first organized baseball game (1846). Courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown NY.
American Jews & America’s Game

Voices of a Growing Legacy in Baseball

LARRY RUTTMAN

Foreword by Bud Selig

Introduction by Martin Abramowitz

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

Buy the Book
For my wife, Lois Raverby Ruttman
Who gives my life order, support, and love always
Sandy Koufax, “great athlete, courageous person,” in the words of the late Marvin Miller. Artist unknown. Courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.
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Foreword

The historian Jacques Barzun was right when he said, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.”

Larry Ruttman knows that too, and that is why I chose to write this foreword to his book *American Jews and America’s Game: Voices of a Growing Legacy in Baseball*. His stories cover almost one hundred years of American history and the place of American Jews in that history, in the words of Major League Baseball players and off-field people deeply enmeshed in the game. In Larry’s telling, the history of baseball and many of its bright lights are recounted as well. This is a book that celebrates family—baseball’s, yours, and mine.

From a professional standpoint, I can think of no greater honor than to serve as the commissioner of baseball. I have been privileged to lead the game I love since September 9, 1992, when, as chairman of the Major League Executive Council, I became the acting commissioner. At the time I told my wife, Sue, that I envisioned filling that role for several months. She was dubious about my prediction. I led the industry on an interim basis until 1998, when the Clubs appointed me as the ninth commissioner of baseball. (Sue knew better then, and she still does today.)

Sue knows that I love the game with all my heart and soul. I was a history major at the University of Wisconsin, and I have often viewed the history of our great nation through the prism of its national pastime.

The story of my family echoes those of so many other American families. I was blessed with wonderful parents who afforded me the opportunity to enjoy a great American childhood. My older brother, Jerry, and I could not have asked for stronger examples to follow. Our mother, Marie, taught us how to pursue our dreams and how to appreciate the world. A sixth-grade teacher, she instilled in us that education was paramount. Our father, Ben, imparted the importance of a work ethic to us. I learned not to do tomorrow what could be done today. Both of my parents wanted us not only to do well but also to do things the right way. Our household on the west side of Milwaukee was a haven for family, faith, and hard work.

The game of baseball was a staple of the Selig home, a microcosm for a nation that held the sport so dear to its history and identity. My parents recog-
nized that baseball provided a way that they could bond with their sons, and they appreciated that my passion for the game resulted in friendships with others at school and in the neighborhood. It was through baseball that my parents saw my first streak of audacity, amusing them when I talked about one day owning a Major League team. But they encouraged me to work hard and to follow that dream.

I had always taken pride in my heritage and my hometown, but the arrival of the Braves from Boston to Milwaukee in 1953 crystallized the powerful sociological values of the grand old game for me. The Braves captured the hearts of the locals in no time, sparking a baseball euphoria in the city of Milwaukee and throughout the state of Wisconsin. As the franchise became a point of civic pride, baseball's innate ability to bring people together and transcend barriers began to resonate deeply within me.

The lives of the legends of this game tell the story of America itself. Jackie Robinson was born in Georgia to a single mother who led the only African American family on their block. As a boy, my favorite player was Joe DiMaggio, whose magnificence drew me to New York to watch him play at Yankee Stadium for my fifteenth birthday. Joe was the son of an Italian immigrant fisherman in San Francisco. Hank Aaron, Babe Ruth, and Ted Williams all represent marvelous American success stories. Another important career in baseball history belonged to Hank Greenberg.

Hank is considered by many to have been the first Jewish superstar in the sports world. Just as Hank was becoming a fixture in the game, near the end of the 1934 regular season, he was confronted with delicate personal decisions—ones that had to be made in the public view—about whether he would play on the holy days on the Jewish calendar. Hank treated those situations with great care, while enduring cruel taunts and slurs from the ignorant. Hank wanted to be judged on the way he played the game. No more, no less. He once said in reflection, “I wanted to be known as a great ballplayer, period.” As a player, as a teammate, and as a competitor, Hank's respect for baseball shaped the public's views of him more than anything else. His precedent—a focused, determined resolve—loomed very large within the framework of baseball history.

At a time when the world faced the most daunting of issues, Hank Greenberg did not wither from serving as a vital public face of baseball, one who carried a special significance for many Americans. He let his exceptional play on the field do the talking for him. As Hank was concluding his brilliant career in 1947 with the Pittsburgh Pirates, he also was helping to shape the
mind of a player who was just beginning his own career. Jackie Robinson, our sport’s greatest pioneer, has cited Hank for being the first opposing player to provide words of support. Hank once told Jackie as they stood side by side at first base, “Don’t let them get you down.”

Later on, Jackie reflected, “Hank Greenberg has class. It stands out all over him.”

It is powerful to consider that baseball was blessed to have some of its most exceptional ambassadors at a time when they were most needed. I have often said that baseball did not truly become the national pastime until Jackie Robinson set foot on the diamond at Ebbets Field on April 15, 1947. Jackie Robinson blazed the trail that made our game complete. To this day, Jackie Robinson and Hank Greenberg continue to represent excellence and grace. They helped to knock down the walls of ignorance within our game. In turn, our society at large benefited from playing witness to their courage from such a unique platform.

So many great Jewish ballplayers followed in Hank’s footsteps, but the legacy of Sandy Koufax illustrates the special connection that Jewish fans have with the great American game. Nearly a half century after his retirement, Sandy remains an inspiration to countless fans who admired not only the left-hander’s dominance on the mound but also the quiet dignity with which he conducted himself. After playing for his hometown Brooklyn Dodgers, Sandy took on a starring role in the shadow of Hollywood once the game migrated west. Bob Hendley was the Chicago Cubs pitcher who performed valiantly in taking the loss in Koufax’s perfect game on September 9, 1965. The right-hander allowed just one hit, one walk, and an unearned run to the Dodgers, in a game that was likely the highlight of his seven-year career in the Major Leagues. He failed only in matching Sandy’s signature fourteen-strikeout effort. Following that game Hendley said in a note to Sandy, “It’s no disgrace to get beat by class.”

The profound Jewish tradition that has resounded throughout Major League Baseball for nearly a century is a part of the tapestry that makes our game so unique. Baseball is no longer just America’s game; it belongs to the world. On March 31, 2011, 234 of the 846 players on Opening Day rosters and disabled lists—amounting to 27.7 percent—were born outside the United States, representing fourteen different countries and territories. Players from the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Canada, Cuba, Japan, Mexico, Australia, Panama, Colombia, Curaçao, Taiwan, Nicaragua, and Korea all started the 2011 season on a Major League roster. Those players have brought
their cultures to life for our fans, who have attended games in record-breaking numbers over the past decade. Players like Ichiro Suzuki, Albert Pujols, and Felix Hernandez are among the many stars who carry special meaning to baseball fans. All those hundreds of players I have mentioned or referred to in this and the preceding paragraphs have found a place in baseball and in Larry’s book.

Our international players have strengthened Major League Baseball’s footprint throughout the world. In the process, they also emboldened our spirit. In 2005 Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association endeavored to celebrate the people who play baseball and where the game is played by announcing the launch of the World Baseball Classic, the most ambitious international baseball event ever ventured. This tournament allowed active Major League players to compete for their home countries for the very first time. Played for the first time in 2006, the World Baseball Classic exceeded all of our wildest expectations as fans embraced the unique blend of enthusiasm of this format. The second installment of the tournament was held in 2009, and a third is now in development for the 2013 season. I am very pleased that Team Israel will participate in a new qualifying round for our next edition, with games scheduled to be held in September 2012. The winners from each qualifying pool will advance into the World Baseball Classic tournament, scheduled for March 2013. All those who have experienced the World Baseball Classic can attest that Jewish fans will take a special pride in Team Israel’s efforts to represent a grand tradition.

I have seen baseball history unfold throughout my career. Through tough times and challenges, the great American game has shown its fierce resiliency. Against the backdrop of history, we have collaborated with the Major League Baseball Players Association to achieve an unprecedented era of labor peace, which allows us to promote and market our sport uninhibitedly. Today Major League Baseball is more popular than at any time in its illustrious history. The past eight years have been the eight best-attended seasons in the history of the sport. The majesty of the game has touched markets throughout the sport. The grand old game has adapted to the new digital age seamlessly, letting fans experience the game in new ways.

Baseball continues to hold a special place in our culture because of its history and the values it represents: teamwork, sportsmanship, effort, and perseverance. Those are the values that Marie and Ben Selig recognized in the game when I fell in love with it, and I have used the compass that they instilled in me to serve as the commissioner of Major League Baseball. It
remains a privilege to lead a sport of unparalleled tradition, which includes the outstanding contributions of Jewish Americans.

So I urge you to read on to be entertained as well as to find out more about America, America's game, and its Jewish participants on and off the field in Larry's book, American Jews and America's Game: Voices of a Growing Legacy in Baseball.

ALLAN H. “BUD” SELIG
Commissioner of Major League Baseball
February 15, 2012
Preface

Providence can be likened to God, and Providence has guided my steps since age seventy, when I undertook a writing career. I write about the “mystery” of that in the preface to my first book, *Voices of Brookline*. That wondrous mystery continued throughout the five years or more it took to complete *American Jews and America’s Game*.

In May 2007 I completed teaching an adult education course in Brookline, Massachusetts, on the art of the interview. I based the course on Studs Terkel’s book *Working* and my own book about Brookline, teaching interactively through back-and-forth interviews with my students. At the end of the course they were, to my mind, over the top in their evaluations of my pedagogic skills and very interested in my next project, which I had not even thought about. Against my strong disclaimers that Studs Terkel was the master, even the originator, of the art of interview and oral history, the students told me that they preferred my style of writing in the first person for rendering a conversation into a story that, they opined, was livelier than a monologue. I expressed to them my doubts that I could replicate that style while writing about people I would be meeting for the first time, as opposed to the many people I knew and interviewed for *Voices of Brookline*. In any event, I then had no idea what my next project might be.

Providence (God?) paid me another visit two days later. It seemed to me that the remarks of my students catalyzed a notion that surfaced in my mind—to write about the impact of Jews on the history of baseball. I had always loved baseball and was a proud Jew, although totally nonobservant—at least ritually—since the day after my bar mitzvah at Congregation Kehillath Israel in Brookline when I turned thirteen, in 1944.

If, indeed, Providence, God, or some creative force beyond man’s power to comprehend was guiding my actions, it seemed to me that would be consistent with those attributes somehow provided to humans to progressively perpetuate and advance their kind: sex, food, shelter, language, and memory to enable the experiences and record of civilization to be written and preserved essentially as true stories passed formally or informally, unbroken, from generation to generation. I believed and was thrilled to think I might
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contribute in a very small way on Jewish and American themes to this never-ending process.

I knew there was a plethora of books on Jews and baseball. I had read many of them and had the impression most were limited to Jewish players and were superficial in that they did not probe into the person's roots and psyche. Having completed sixty or more in-depth interviews for Voices of Brookline, I knew that my strength lay in getting people to talk deeply about their experiences and thoughts. I believed from the start that interviews with personages connected with baseball could be fashioned into a lively book on baseball, Judaism, and America. Although the book metamorphosed over time, that basic idea remained.

The “force” stayed with me. Some days after my idea first surfaced I found out about the new Israel Baseball League, set to inaugurate its first season in late June 2007. A series of fortuitous events put me in touch with Marty Appel, former Yankees public relations director, PR man for the new league, acknowledged public relations guru, and the best-selling author of many books. Impressive, yes, but no more impressive than Marty personally, one of nature’s nicest people. In one fell, gracious, and generous swoop Marty Appel made it possible for me to get off the blocks at a record pace. In a matter of days Marty, in effect, plunked me down in Israel in the company of several former Jewish Major League Baseball players like Ken Holtzman, Ron Blomberg, Art Shamsky, and Steve Hertz, who had been enlisted to manage teams in the Israel Baseball League.

Interviewing them, Marty, and others in those heady early summer days in Israel, and reconnecting with my Jewish heritage in Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and Jerusalem, proved to be the tonic that propelled me on a five-year journey of discovery and creativity.

By the end of September of that year I had sat for three solid hours at the elbow of Marvin Miller, whom I believe to be not only the most influential Jew in baseball history but arguably the most influential baseball personage ever for his leadership of the players in attaining free agency, ridding baseball of its plantation mentality, and changing the economic face of the game forever. Marvin Miller’s personal comments showed me an exemplary Jewish life that empowered him to achieve his goals.

Certainly there could be no book without Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg. But Sandy Koufax was known to be elusive, if not reclusive. How do you get him? Indeed, where can you find him? Once again the resourceful Marty Appel came galloping to my rescue. Marty had known Sandy from his
days as the public relations director of the Yankees in the seventies, not long after Koufax retired in 1966. I knew that their relationship had continued. If I sent Marty a letter to Koufax, would he forward it? Yes, he would. So far, so good. I sent the letter to Marty, and Marty sent the letter to Sandy.

Early one Saturday morning some weeks later, unpredictably, startlingly, and thrillingly, Sandy Koufax called me at home to gently tell me he would not sit for an interview. In the story on Sandy Koufax in this book I describe that relatively extended conversation and how it gave me the story on the iconic mound-master I so badly needed. Thank you, Marty! Thank you, Sandy!

In late June 2008 I attended a Hank Greenberg weekend at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Of course, I knew a story on Hank Greenberg was central to this endeavor, he being the most important baseball figure in American Jewish history (as distinguished from baseball history), if not the most important twentieth-century American Jewish figure.

Hank Greenberg had passed away at age seventy-five in 1986, so I would have to build a story by interviewing key figures in his life. At Cooperstown that weekend I interviewed his biographer, Pulitzer Prize winner Ira Berkow, his documentary film biographer, Aviva Kempner, and his daughter, Alva, who opened the way to meeting at a later date with Hank’s eminently successful and agreeable son, Steve Greenberg, in New York City. I also met with Hall of Fame slugger Ralph Kiner in Palm Beach, Florida, who proved to be an affable and communicative man. Kiner shared with me stories of his almost forty-year close friendship with Hank Greenberg, springing from Hank’s mentoring of Ralph when they played together in Pittsburgh in 1947, Greenberg’s last Major League Baseball season and Kiner’s second. I believe I was able to form a portrait of Hank Greenberg showing how great a man he truly was as a person and a professional with the input of these giving people.

In writing about Hank Greenberg, who seemingly, but not actually, had come close to abandoning his Orthodox Jewish roots, and talking to his son Steve and daughter, Alva, who had gravitated back toward Judaism from an essentially nonreligious upbringing, I realized that the scope of the book had exponentially enlarged into an anecdotal examination of the character of individual Jews in America and issues of American Judaism today, most notably the viability of American Judaism in the future. For manifold reasons, that issue has periodically plagued the Jewish community in America for almost two centuries, as Jews have grappled with, even while enjoying, the license granted by America’s freedom and Judaism’s tolerance of each person’s individuality, a doubleheader that can and has led many a Jew beyond the pale of Judaism.
Along with that, the scope of who was a proper person to interview likewise began to enlarge. In other words, I put the question to myself as to who is a Jewish voice of American baseball. The further I went, the more that concept developed, until at last I thought it was any Jewish person who had a passion for baseball. Thus people with no ties to organized baseball, whose main calling was in other areas or disciplines, were brought into the fold.

The next stroke of luck came in late October 2008, when I met with America’s foremost Jewish historian, Professor Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University, author of the prizewinning *American Judaism* (2004). Jonathan has generously mentored me since that meeting and throughout this process. Like breaking sticks, Jonathan gave me an apt title for this book. When I told him my idea for the title, he thought for a moment and then said, “How about something simple like ‘Jewish Voices of American Baseball?’” While neither of our ideas became the ultimate title, can a thought-provoking suggestion for a title condition an author as to how he perceives the book and then conceives its contents? Yes, and yes! Jonathan’s wise suggestion advanced my conception of the book to a higher plane—from one anchored in baseball to one growing into the realms of Jewish and American life. Thank you, Professor Jonathan Sarna!

Ultimately I interviewed fifty people in conversations averaging well over one hour each; several extended to two or three hours.

I am not generally given to superstition, mysticism, or the notion that God watches after me personally, but I do invoke Providence once again to answer the query many folks have put to me, which is how I obtained this impressive, probably unprecedented, array of interviewees. I will allow that a dose of perseverance and chutzpah inherited from my late nonagenarian mother helped to obtain and draw thoughtful, insightful, and personal responses from such inspiring people.

The real answer to that question is the generous collaborative spirit tendered to me by those working in this same vineyard. Dr. Martin Abramowitz, the creator of several sets of now-famous Jewish baseball cards, whom I had interviewed early on for this book, opined at a point when I thought my interviewing was finished that interviewing some individuals with serious commitment to Jewish life, both religious and secular, who were also associated with baseball would lend needed balance to the book. How right Martin was! He led me to New York rabbi Michael Paley, Yeshiva University professor Jeffrey Gurock, Marlins’ vice chairman Joel Mael, *New York Times* columnist Murray Chass, and Tufts professor Sol Gittleman, interviews that expanded not only
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the book but also my own thinking about Judaism. Also, Marty’s copious literary abilities flowed into the apt and thoughtful introduction he wrote for the book. Finally, there was Marty’s ready and giving nod to the notion of using words akin to those he had coined, *American Jews and America’s Game*, as the title of this book. Triples are tough to get in baseball, trifectas even tougher at the track, and a triple blessing even more rare. Thank you, Marty Abramowitz!

Providence and perseverance were my helpmates yet again when I sought that eminent person to write the foreword for this book who most appropriately exemplifies and represents the several strands of American and Jewish life and history set forth in its pages. Thank you, Commissioner of Baseball Allan H. “Bud” Selig!

At the last, casting my eyes on the whole body of material I had collected from notable Jews in only one field of endeavor, I realized the book provided at least a partial answer, albeit anecdotal, to a question of great interest to Jews and non-Jews alike: how have Jews gained substantial influence in many fields in America despite their relatively miniscule numbers?

The expansion of the scope of the book and its subjects together with seeking out and visiting those subjects led to a double odyssey, one of the body, the other of the mind. That combination made a singular labor of love into the labor of love of a lifetime; a labor that proved to be an experience I had always envied in others—the total focus on and immersion in a project so quickening to the spirit and imagination as to exclude all else from consciousness while engaged in that work.

*Peripatetic* is the word that springs to mind to describe my physical periperegnations: among my points of debarkation were Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in Israel; Boston, Cambridge, Newton, Northampton, Brockton, and Wellfleet in Massachusetts; New York City thrice, Cooperstown twice, and Stone Ridge in New York; Los Angeles, La Jolla, Rancho Mirage, Tarzana, and Corona in California; Palm Beach, Fort Myers, Kissimmee, and Winter Haven in Florida; Phoenix, Arizona; and Baltimore, Maryland. I would submit that to visit the United States of America is a good way to put one in mind of writing about it.

Of course, an interview is best conducted in privacy in a quiet place. However, I accepted that opportunity trumps preference, which led to a multiplicity of venues, some close to bizarre: Gabe Kapler at 6:00 a.m. at a Starbucks in Tarzana, California; Craig Breslow and Kevin Youkilis among scantily clad bodies in the Red Sox clubhouse at Fort Myers, Florida, where I was lucky enough to strike up a conversation with Manny Ramirez while waiting for Youk to finish his repast; Brad Ausmus and David Newhan in the tumult of
the Astros clubhouse in Kissimmee, Florida; Jeffrey Maier on the balcony at the Borders flagship bookstore at lunchtime in the heart of historical Boston, directly opposite the Old South Meeting House; Marty Appel, Ken Holtzman, Ron Blomberg, Art Shamsky, and Steve Hertz in the vast lounge of the Dan Panorama Hotel on the shores of the Mediterranean in Tel Aviv; Marv Goldklang and Murray Chass amid the clatter of dishes and boisterousness of conversation in busy restaurants in Manhattan; Roger Kahn in the dining room of his home at the cocktail hour; Tiby Eisen and Anita Foss in the Brentwood Inn, just around the corner from the house where many think O. J. did the deed; many others, including Bud Selig, Alan Dershowitz, Theo Epstein, Don Fehr, Barney Frank, Jeffrey Gurock, Andrew Zimbalist, Michael Paley, Joel Mael, Sol Gittleman, Mark Shapiro, and Ron Shapiro, in the privacy of their respective sanctum sanctorums; and finally, late in the 2011 season, Sam Fuld and then a few weeks later Ian Kinsler, each in the visiting team’s dugout along the third base line in my own field of dreams, Boston’s fabled Fenway Park.

Speaking of quiet places, the quietest was the Hall of Fame Library in the beautiful village of Cooperstown, New York, where I spent two whole days in the autumn of 2010 culling photos and illustrations from its vast collection with the blessings of its president, Jeff Idelson, and the unfailing ministrations of its librarian, Freddy Berowski, and the excavations of its archivists, John Horne and Pat Kelly. Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words, old ones especially, and close to thirty of the pictures seen in this volume come from that treasure trove. Thank you, Jeff, and your archeologists of America’s game.

And like Odysseus my trek was not without physical danger. Leaving my interview with economist Andrew Zimbalist at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, at dusk during a storm that had only mildly interfered with my progress from Roger Kahn’s home in Stone Ridge, New York, earlier that February day, I determined to traverse the hundred miles separating me from home and hearth. To my dismay the storm turned into a display of practically everything Mother Nature can hurl down at mankind: gusty and displacing wind, snow, rain, hail, ice, fog, dusk melting into darkness, and decreasing visibility compounded by huge tractor-trailers closing in and hurling mounds of snow and ice onto my windscreen. Hunkering down, focusing on the task, banishing fear but not caution, getting the most from my no-longer-youthful powers of vision, I slogged thankfully through to my safe haven.

The mental odyssey I experienced was energizing and informative in a more or less utilitarian way and inspiring and personally renewing in a per-
Personal way. I knew a lot about baseball going in and a lot more coming out, not only about the game itself but also about its centrality in and connection to American life and Jewish assimilation.

Personally, I discovered much I never knew about Judaism and its history and values, renewed my connections with my own heritage, and reinvented myself, or at least my thoughts about myself, as a Jew, although that would not be discernible to a casual or even an interested observer. I have never been observant in a ritual sense, and that continues. I was always a proud Jew, and that too continues. I think I was always aware of the parallel between American freedom and Judaism’s big tent, which embraces many ways of living as a Jew in the world, but my appreciation and pride in that has been acutely sharpened, honing, too, my appreciation of America. I have always been (I hope) accepting of my fellow humans, forgiving in my attitudes, and generous toward my fellows from wherever they come, but I realize anew and better now how that derives from my beginnings as a Jew, and I now more consciously seek to live those values.

How happy I am to contribute in some small measure to the writings of Jews about their world and the world of all those people with whom Jews share their lives.

LARRY RUTTMAN

Brookline, Massachusetts
January 26, 2012
Acknowledgments

If someone wants to know who wrote a book it seems to me to be more useful to go to the acknowledgments than to the title page. Sure, the listed author had the idea, did a lot of work, wrote the words, and is credited by the world as the “author” of the book. But that author would not have been able to get from A to Z without his few or many collaborators who, it may fairly be said, wrote the book with him and without whom there would have been no book. So it is with deepest gratitude that I cite here my many collaborators.

The subtitle of this book begins with the significant word voices. Indeed, the voices of all fifty of my interviewees are the natural resource from which the book emerges. So the first acknowledgement must go in equal measure to all of those generous people who sat with me for interviews that rarely took less than an hour, and usually more. Their names, many of them household, are found in the contents to this volume. I also cite other interviewees whose names may not appear there: Hank Greenberg’s son, Steve Greenberg, and his daughter, Alva; his good friend, Hall of Fame slugger Ralph Kiner; and his prizewinning documentary biographer, Aviva Kempner (his book biographer, Pulitzer Prize winner Ira Berkow, has his own story in these pages); Norm Sherry, Sandy Koufax’s catcher and mentor; and Sandy’s teenage friend Howard Aksen. Every one of them spoke freely and deeply to me, giving me the raw material to enable me to write this book. Adding frosting to that cake are the photos, many striking, which several of the people interviewed went out of their way to provide to me.

Thank you all!

I spoke of collaborators above. I think every author has an inner circle of those, on whom he can call at any time for help ranging from the practical and factual to the emotional. Marty Appel, as described in the preface, got me off and running in Israel in 2007 and has been by my side with his public relations and literary savvy ever since, often on a daily basis. My highly esteemed literary agent, Don Fehr of Trident Media in New York, amazed me when he took me on as a client, gave me invaluable guidance in shaping the book to be acceptable to publishers, sold the book to a great publisher, and continues to be a good friend and advisor. In that context, let me not forget a friend
Acknowledgments

from childhood years, Yale Altman, who applied his contacts in his field of publishing to set in motion the wheels that took me to Don Fehr’s doorstep. As I tell in the preface, Marty Abramowitz, “the Jewish baseball card guy,” who wrote this book’s introduction, has helped me in manifold ways, not the least of which was providing the title to this book. Professor Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University, America’s preeminent scholar of and author about Judaism in America, became a prime mentor from the moment I stepped into his office and has answered every call for guidance I have uttered. Professor Jeffrey Gurock of Yeshiva University, whom I got to know while interviewing him for this book, has likewise become a mentor, sending me off in the right direction more than a few times. Once again I have relied constantly on the great publishing expertise, exceptional judgment, taste, and warm friendship of Eugene Bailey to solve a multiplicity of problems. Where would I be without the “Oh my God” computer skills and friendship of Greg Spiers! Or without the stenographic skills of Cathy Jenness and the transcribing abilities of Mariana Folco and Samantha Cheng, all of whom, like Gene Bailey, helped me so much on my first book, Voices of Brookline, and stuck with me on this one. And always there was the wise counsel of longtime close friend Mel Glusgol, whose lawyerlike wisdom, combined with his street smarts, provided many an idea to advance this venture. Of course, my long-suffering wife, Lois, who had to listen to this stuff day in and day out for years, not without complaint, but always, in her unique way, keeping me on an even keel and offering support and encouragement. Lois’s driving skills were applied all over America, most memorably one day when she guided us across the vast and empty reach of desert between Al Rosen’s home in Rancho Mirage, California, to Phoenix, Arizona, where Bud Selig, Jerry Reinsdorf, and Al Clark awaited me. Every person’s inner circle should include an animal, and mine contains Puppy-Puppy, a beautiful, noncomplaining, and ever-loving standard poodle, who is always there for me.

A very special vote of thanks goes to Commissioner of Baseball Allan H. “Bud” Selig, who generously accepted my suggestion that he write the foreword to this book. For me that is a signal honor. Not only has baseball prospered on his watch, but Bud Selig’s essential decency and love of family and community have found their way to the nerve centers of the game, alleviating much of the strife in which it had previously been ensnarled. I also wish to acknowledge the more than helpful skill and grace of his trusted senior executive assistant, Mary Burns, and the friendliness and abilities of his senior vice president of public relations, Pat Courtney.
I wish to thank acquiring editor Rob Taylor, assistant acquisitions editor Courtney Ochsner, associate project editor Sabrina Stellrecht, direct mail manager Tish Fobben, publicity manager Acacia Gentrup, and all their colleagues at the University of Nebraska Press, first for finding in this book sufficient merit to want to publish it and then for treating the manuscript and my ideas for the advancement of the book with sincerity and respect. That was especially shown by their assignment of the manuscript to copy editor Joy Margheim, whose superb technical skills and firm grasp of the book’s meaning have improved it substantially.

Illustrations are so important in any book, and especially so in a book of this nature, which presents the stories of so many individuals whose personalities an author seeks to truthfully project and a game that has its own special beauty. Thanks go to Jeff Idelson, president of the Baseball Hall of Fame; reference librarian Freddy Berowski; and archive librarians John Horne and Pat Kelly for making the archives of that institution available to me, from which close to thirty of the illustrations in this book are derived.

I wish to acknowledge too, with profound thanks, historian Irwin Cohen of Detroit, Michigan, who provided me with an image of Jewish hero Hank Greenberg in 1935 that expresses so beautifully what that great man was all about and is so prescient about the profound cultural changes that unfolded in America over the following thirty years and Greenberg’s place in them.

Many thanks go to the Major League teams that took time out to provide to me photos, some unusual, of players and off-field people I interviewed: the Chicago Cubs (Sam Fuld, and Steve Stone and Harry Caray), the Chicago White Sox (Jerry Reinsdorf with Jim Thome), the Texas Rangers (two of Ian Kinsler), the Oakland Athletics (Craig Breslow), the San Francisco Giants (Al Rosen as general manager), and the Cleveland Indians (Mark Shapiro).

Unless one has unlimited time and resources, the best time to interview big league players is during spring training or during the season itself. To do that one needs the cooperation of the respective team(s), usually through its public relations or communications director. Several of the player interviews in this book have come about that way. Special thanks go to the highly respected John Blake, who served in that capacity for the Red Sox and then the Rangers during the time I was assembling this book. John arranged my interviews with Theo Epstein, Kevin Youkilis, and Craig Breslow at Fort Myers, Florida, in the spring of 2008 and then of Ian Kinsler in September 2011 at Fenway Park. I want to acknowledge, too, the part great catcher and now high Rangers official Jim Sundberg played in the Kinsler interview. Thanks too to Jay
Acknowledgments

Lucas of the Astros, who provided entrée to the locker room at Kissimmee, Florida, where I interviewed Brad Ausmus and David Newhan. Likewise to Rick Vaughan of the Rays, who met me hard by the Rays’ dugout at Fenway Park to facilitate my tête-à-tête with Sam Fuld.

In fact, the good offices and goodwill of big league teams are necessary in assembling the thousand and one details required in authoring a book like this. At the risk of leaving someone out I would like to thank certain people by name: Bob Rose and Debbie Gallas of the Athletics, Anita Fasano and Barb Reincke of the White Sox, Lorraine Hamilton of the Mets, Dani Holmes-Kirk of the Cubs, Erik Ruiz of the Rays, Julie Myers of the Padres, Tera Bryant and Taunee Taylor of the Rangers, Marlene Lehky of the Indians, Suzanna Mitchell of the Giants, and Alice McGillion, who does good work on behalf of the Yankees.

David Dahl of the Boston Globe suggested a story on this project, which was written by Brock Parker and appeared prominently in that paper one Sunday. I thank them and the paper for that, as I do Steve Maas, editor of the Jewish Advocate, and its writer, Robin Regensburg, for their story there on the same subject. Another article in similar vein appeared in Shalom Magazine, engineered by the indefatigable journalist Susie Davidson and the editor Shirley Nigri Farber. All were most helpful in getting out word on my efforts.

I must acknowledge certain other people too: Smith College professor, economist, and author Andy Zimbalist, for his help and insights; publisher and author Ira Wood, for his encouragement and expertise; Tufts professor and author Sol Gittleman, for his support and goodwill; documentary filmmaker Peter Miller, of Willow Pond Films, for his help; author Bob Ruxin for his up-front and helpful remarks on literary style; publisher Tom Hallock for his fine advice; database developer Susan Worst for her expertise about the web; and Dr. Warren Manning for his enthusiastic support and constant friendship.

It doesn’t end there. People helped with putting this book together practically every day of every week I worked on it. Space requires one to stop someplace. Other people drop through the crevices of memory. So I’ll say what authors generally say and always mean: it is my responsibility alone for any errors or omissions. And finally, that I appreciate so much all my collaborators, named and unnamed, who have joined with me to write this book.
American Jews & America’s Game
Introduction

DR. MARTIN ABRAMOWITZ,
President of Jewish Major Leaguers, Inc.

Guests arriving on May 10, 2010, for the first-ever White House reception in honor of Jewish American Heritage Month were met not only by the president of the United States, Barack Obama, but also by a display of five artifacts selected by the Library of Congress and the National Archives as being of particular historical significance in terms of the 350-year history of American Jewry: President George Washington’s encouraging letter to the Touro Synagogue Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, which stated, “the Government of the United States . . . gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance”; poet Emma Lazarus’s iconic poem The New Colossus, which appears on a bronze plaque affixed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty and includes the famous verse “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”; Irving Berlin’s manuscript lyrics of his inspiring song “God Bless America”; President Harry Truman’s official document of May 14, 1948, recognizing the “State of Israel”; and a framed set of Jewish baseball cards!

As Melvin Israel of Birmingham, Alabama (known to generations of Yankee fans and This Week in Baseball addicts as Mel Allen) might have said, “How about that!”

The White House event built on an unprecedented, decade-long stream of historical interest in and documentation of Jews in baseball: Aviva Kempner’s Hank Greenberg documentary film; Peter and Joachim Horvitz’s Big Book of Jewish Baseball; our own six baseball card sets and two Hall of Fame programs; Jane Leavy’s Sandy Koufax biography (deepening the legend of arguably the greatest left-handed pitcher of all time); the as-told-to memoirs of former big leaguers Art Shamsky, Ron Blomberg, and Norm Miller; and Howard Megdal’s The Baseball Talmud, a book that applied advanced baseball statistics (i.e., sabermetrics) to the all-time roster of Jewish players.

On the field the 2000–2009 decade saw not only the largest number of Jewish players (twenty-nine in all, and record highs of fourteen in several sea-
sons,) but was witness to an extraordinary cadre of talent: of these twenty-nine, several were All-Stars and won Gold Gloves at least once, one was Rookie of the Year, and another led the National League in hits (both Jewish firsts).

Significant Jewish records fell: Shawn Green and then Brad Ausmus set records for games played; Green and Ian Kinsler established new marks for consecutive-game hitting streaks; Jason Marquis became the first Jewish pitcher since Sandy Koufax to record six consecutive double-digit winning seasons; and Scott Feldman had the most one-season wins by a Jewish pitcher in almost thirty years. A couple of all-time baseball records fell during the decade to Jewish players. Shawn Green in a 2002 game rapped four homers, a double, and a single to set a new Major League record of nineteen total bases in a nine-inning game. That may have been the best single-game offensive performance ever in the history of baseball, unless you count Ian Kinsler’s triumph in 2009, when he hit for the cycle and went 6-for-6 in the same nine-inning game, a feat last accomplished more than a century ago. Meanwhile, in the field, Kevin Youkilis broke an eighty-seven-year-old record for perfect play by a first baseman by handling 2,002 consecutive chances without an error.

Off the field, a Jewish commissioner (Bud Selig) faced two Jewish leaders of the Major League Baseball Players Association (Donald Fehr and Michael Weiner), determining the fates of at least six Jewish-owned Major League franchises. Meanwhile, the heroics of Major League players were documented by the Jewish official historian of baseball (Jerome Holtzman) and the Jewish director of one of America’s iconic shrines, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum (Jeff Idelson), employing a “stats” system developed by a Jewish statistician more than a century ago (Abraham “Abe” Yager).

The decade ended with the production of a new documentary film (including a wonderful and rare interview with Sandy Koufax), *Baseball and American Jews: A Love Story*.

And now here comes *American Jews and America’s Game*, Larry Ruttman’s one-of-a-kind collection of stories based on his many in-depth conversations with Jews having a special attachment to baseball, as players or otherwise.

Casey Stengel once modestly acknowledged, after one of his Yankee championship seasons, “I couldn’t have done it without the players.” Larry Ruttman has chosen his players well: Brad Ausmus, Kevin Youkilis, Gabe Kapler, David Newhan, Craig Breslow, Ken Holtzman, Al Rosen, Norm Sherry, Art Shamsky, black convert to Judaism Elliott Maddox, and yes, a guy named Koufax. But in addition to the roster of players in this volume, Ruttman casts
a uniquely broad net: Commissioner of Baseball Bud Selig; game-changing executive director of the Players Association Marvin Miller and his successor in that position, Donald Fehr; journalists and authors Roger Kahn, Murray Chass, Ross Newhan, and Ira Berkow; scholar Jeffrey Gurock; owner Jerry Reinsdorf; publicist Marty Appel; sports economist Andrew Zimbalist; noted college coach and former Major Leaguer Steve Hertz; fans Barney Frank and Alan Dershowitz; Hall of Fame slugger Ralph Kiner; and distaff professionals Thelma “Tiby” Eisen and Anita Foss of the World War II women’s baseball league made famous in the movie *A League of Their Own*.

Taken together, these interviews are testament to the enduring and mysterious attachment of American Jews to America’s game.

I’ll have more to say about the uniqueness and particular utility of Larry Ruttman’s book in a bit, but first I need to consider the attachment of Jews to baseball. Before waxing too poetical, some historical and sociological perspective is in order.

First of all, baseball is neither the first nor the only sports love of American Jews. For the first third of the twentieth century, boxing was indeed, as one scholar has put it, “a Jewish sport.” Twenty-seven of the recognized professional champions during this period were Jewish, as were many promoters, managers, and scribes. Jewish fandom was right there with them, echoing the scuffle of making it in America as a Jew in the century’s early years.

And when the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association basketball club, the Philadelphia Sphas, morphed into a professional basketball team in a process that led ultimately to the formation of the National Basketball Association, with a Jewish founding commissioner and rosters heavily stocked with Jewish players, Jewish fandom was there as well.

Secondly, Jews are hardly the only Americans to have love affairs with baseball; it is, after all, America’s game. Italian Americans were there for Tony Lazzeri and Joe DiMaggio, and for the game. The American Midwest was there for the Dean brothers, Dizzy and Daffy, and for the game. African Americans were there for Jackie Robinson and all who followed him, and for the game. Southerners were there for Ty Cobb, and for the game. And all Americans were there for Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Christy Mathewson, and Walter Johnson, and for the game.

While there may be some evidence that baseball is in the process of being overtaken by football and basketball as American spectator sports, and by
basketball and even soccer as participatory sports, old myths die hard, and baseball remains America’s game.

There is a traditional Jewish midrash, or legend, that the founding patriarch Abraham constructed a tent with an opening on each side so that travelers, whatever direction they were coming from, would be sure to see the welcoming entrance. For American Jews, baseball has been the tent of Abraham, offering many travelers entrance into both American life and Jewish self-identification.

The accepted wisdom is that the engagement of American Jews with baseball has historically been an engagement with America. If baseball is America’s game, how could the immigrant generation and their children not embrace it? Throw in Greenberg and Koufax and then the father-son continuity theme that is so strong an element of Jewish tradition, seen in this volume in stories on Hank Greenberg and his son Steve Greenberg, the former deputy commissioner of baseball; Ron Shapiro, renowned player agent and negotiator and his son Mark Shapiro, now president of the Cleveland Indians; and Hall of Fame columnist Ross Newhan and his son David Newhan, a Major League player with several teams, and you have most of the ingredients of the chemistry that is the Jewish love affair with baseball.

Okay, maybe that explains the Jewish baseball connection for most of the twentieth century. But today? The fact that, at least in absolute numbers, there have been more Jewish players in the past decade or so and that a fair number of them, like Youkilis and Ausmus, have been more than journeymen, certainly hasn't hurt in terms of fan interest. It also hasn't hurt that the most recent decades in American life have been decades of ethnic pride for African American and Hispanic athletes and fans, particularly in the sports world. If ethnic pride is increasingly acceptable, certainly it’s acceptable for Jews, too, right?

I’m wondering if there isn’t an additional element at work, which reflects and responds to a more recent and recently observed reality of American Jewish life: the increasing polarization of American Jewry. There appear to be more American Jews than ever who are totally or almost totally disengaged from Jewish life and more Jews than ever who would describe themselves as seriously engaged and committed Jews. The third group, which has lost “market share,” is the one we used to describe as “moderately affiliated.” Many of them (or their children) have either virtually dropped out or got religion, and many of those who have dropped out still see themselves as culturally Jewish or of Jewish heritage. These generational changes are most strikingly shown
in the three father and son stories alluded to above, in two of which we see later generations spinning away from the Jewish core but in the other one surprising us by moving closer.

Students of American Jewry have commented on the increasing disconnects between these groups. Isn't it interesting, then, that *American Jews and America’s Game* robustly reflects all three groups? It’s as if baseball, which once had been a way for Jews to unite with America, has increasingly been a way for some Jews to express their Jewishness and a way for unattached, secular, and religious Jews to be united with each other in their passion for the game and their pride in Jewish accomplishment. Baseball has historically helped Jews become Americans; it may now increasingly help Americans stay Jewish and connect with their brethren.

Which brings us to the unique value of *American Jews and America’s Game*.

Like the rest of us, most of the folks whose voices we hear in this book do not spend their waking hours contemplating the state of American Jewry, the varieties of Jewish identity and observance, and the future of Israel. But it’s impossible to be a reasonably thoughtful Jew in America without being aware of the issues that are in the air around us: intermarriage, with both losses and gains for Jewish identity; the growing polarization within American Jewry between the seriously engaged and the almost total dropouts; a renewed emphasis among many Jews in the arenas of social justice and, perhaps to a lesser extent, of Jewish culture and ethnicity; the emergence of a generation for whom the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel are historical items rather than compelling realities; mixtures of pride in and disengagement from Israel; and the wonder and pride at opportunities for Jews in this country, together with perhaps an uneasy vigilance against anti-Semitism.

These issues are not the first things Jewish baseball players or others connected to the game talk about when interviewed, and they’re certainly not on the minds of most interviewers. But Larry Ruttmann has been thinking about them, and we find that when he raises them, they resonate with and rebound from the folks he’s interviewed, whose stories are a unique mix of baseball and reflection on their lives as Jews. Uncovering and documenting the very fact that being Jewish still has meaning and power in some way for virtually all of his interviewees is only one of the contributions of this book to our understanding of American Judaism generally and its relation to baseball specifically.

But what is that meaning and power? Although this volume’s robust sample of interviewees is not intended to be statistically significant, the folks who
talked with Larry Ruttman, and directly to us through him, reflect the range of possibilities in proportions that are probably not far off from the reality of American Jewish life: a minority remain deeply committed to Jewish tradition and observance, while for most of these Jewish voices, being Jewish is more about cultural and ethnic identity and about expressing in their lives a set of values that they associate with Judaism: family, education, honest labor, fairness, charity, civic engagement, and social justice.

These interviewees are for the most part conscious of the fact that although these values do in fact have roots in Judaism, they are also deeply rooted in the best of America’s culture and the American self-image. Here is where the lines between Jewish identity and American identity begin to blur.

When our organization (Jewish Major Leaguers) was preparing our Celebration of Jews in Baseball at the Hall of Fame in 2004, the good and extremely supportive folks at Cooperstown, the shrine of baseball, gave us a draft program highlighting the fact that the program was about the baseball feats of “Jewish Americans.” We quickly changed that to “American Jews,” because that’s where our head was; we were interested in how these particular Jews played America’s game.

In retrospect, I think the Hall of Fame had it right. What Larry Ruttman’s fine volume of interviews and conversations confirms for us is that the Jewish voices of American baseball are overwhelmingly the voices of Jewish Americans, proud of their Jewish heritage, sometimes more but often less connected to Jewish tradition and observance, moving forward comfortably as Americans.

What does this mean for the future of Jewish life and Judaism in America? Some observers cry, “Oy gevalt” (an untranslatable Yiddish cry of woe and despair), others either welcome or accept the fact that it’s a normal and inevitable process of assimilation and loss of ethnic identity. I prefer Brandeis University historian Jonathan Sarna’s reminder that we are a resilient people and that it seems to be every generation’s lot to worry about the future of Jewish life in America.

Larry Ruttman, like Jonathan Sarna, acknowledges the worries and gets his interviewees to talk about them but stresses with and through them the resilience of American Jews amid the joys of baseball and America.