

## **Willy Meisl's "German Soccer Nation:" Internationalism, Austrian Patriotism, and Jewish Pride in Interwar Sports Writing**

### **Introduction**

This essay deals with the sports and soccer journalism of the Viennese-Jewish writer Willy Meisl (1895–1968). It focuses particularly on how Meisl's writings both represented and articulated an Austrian patriotism and a predominantly cultural rather than a political Zionism, as well as how he used his journalism to fight an aggressive German nationalism, antisemitism, and Jew-hatred more generally. I argue that while Meisl would have preferred if nationalism and politics more generally could have been kept out of sport, some of his writings can indeed be read as articulations of an incipient Austrian patriotism during the First Republic (1918–38) and of pride in his Jewish identity.

Meisl expressed his dual identity as an Austrian and a Jew through an identification with the technical refinement and sheer beauty of Austrian soccer in comparison to what he considered less accomplished national styles of the sport, including German and English soccer. Indeed, one might say that for Meisl "the German soccer nation" of the first decades of the twentieth century was Austria rather than Germany. This football nation was embodied in an ideal manner in the Austrian national team of the 1930s, the "wonder team" (Wunderteam) which his brother Hugo Meisl (1881–1937) coached. Moreover, Meisl was proud that Jewish players, coaches, and administrators played a singular role in interwar Austrian soccer, both at club and national level, which bore no relation to their small numbers in the population. Famously, the Zionist club Hakoah Vienna, five of whose players made it into the Austrian national team between 1923 and 1926, was the first continental team to beat top-level English opposition, defeating West Ham United 5:0 in 1923.

At the same time, Meisl deplored the role of body culture in the rise of German National Socialism, in whose seizure of power, he thought, German *Turnen* (gymnastics) had played a major role. This was the subject of his never published book manuscript *Sie turnten zur Macht* (They seized

power through gymnastics) which he wrote during exile in London. In it, Meisl laid most of the responsibility for the rise of the Nazis at the gymnasts' feet. While as a prominent sportswriter Meisl was one of the strongest advocates of sports internationalism in the Weimar Republic, with the rise of the Nazis he felt that Germany had become a nation of ultra-nationalist *Turner* rather than of internationalist sportsmen.

One key ingredient to German nationalism and National Socialism was antisemitism and Meisl saw it as his task to debunk negative representations of Jews through his writings. He did so from early on in his career as a journalist, standing up specifically against the antisemitic stereotype of the Jewish male as being corporally deficient and physically less capable than his non-Jewish counterpart. The negative representation of the circumcised, long-nosed, flat-footed, bodily feeble and "degenerate" Jewish male was a longstanding motif in European culture.<sup>1</sup> While Meisl was too assimilated into Austrian-German culture to actively propagate a "muscular Judaism" (*Muskeljudentum*) in relation to a Jewish state in Palestine, he was a cultural Zionist who agreed with Max Nordau who had coined the term in 1898 that Jews were as physically capable as any other ethnic group. Nazi antisemitism pushed Meisl to support political Zionism somewhat more actively after going into exile in Britain, though he apparently never contemplated emigrating to Palestine himself.

In addition to being an Austrian patriot, an assimilated Austrian-German Jew and cultural Zionist, Meisl belonged to an international elite of sports functionaries, coaches, sports writers and editors in the interwar years, men like the Arsenal coach Herbert Chapman, the French football administrator Henri Delaunay, the Italian national coach Vittorio Pozzo, and his brother Hugo. These men shared the conviction that sport's main appeals lay in its ability to transcend traditional national boundaries and to allow for fair and rulebound competition rather than forcing opponents from different national backgrounds into a fight to the death like in war.

To substantiate my argument about the relationship between national identity and sport in Meisl's writing, I explore some of his journalism from the early 1930s for the broadsheet *Vossische*

*Zeitung* aka *Voss* which was published by Ullstein. Ullstein, a Jewish-German, family-owned publishing empire, shared the political centre-ground of the Berlin and German press market with the equally left-liberal Jewish-German publishing house Mosse and the right-wing nationalist Hugenberg press, the latter helping to pave Hitler's way to power in the early 1930s. I interpret some of Meisl's articles on soccer, especially his coverage of a famous international friendly between England and Austria in December 1932. Moreover, to explain Meisl's view of sports journalism and his attitude towards sport more generally, his first book on the 1924 Paris Summer Olympic Games and his 1928 *Sport am Scheidewege* (Sport at the Crossroads) are also worth a closer look. The latter, his best-known publication from the pre-war period, examines a whole range of issues, from the amateurism-professionalism dichotomy to the commercialization of sports and its role in public health. This essay ends with a cursory analysis of the already mentioned manuscript on German gymnastics *Sie turnten zur Macht*.

### **Biographical Sketch**

The youngest son of a family of merchants, Meisl was born into a family of the Viennese Jewish educated bourgeoisie, whose intellectual members were often fascinated by the new mass culture of sport and soccer especially. Willy and his fifteen-year-older brother Hugo, a soccer player, referee, sportswriter, and editor, as well as the future manager of the Austrian national team, were such bourgeois intellectuals infatuated with soccer. Hugo, along with Chapman, Jimmy Hogan, the inventor of the "Vienna School" of soccer, the Hungarian Béla Guttmann, and the Italian Pozzo, became one of the most influential coaches of the interwar period.<sup>2</sup> He rose to international prominence when the *Wunderteam* strung together an unbeaten run of fourteen consecutive matches against high-class opposition between April 1931 and December 1932. The team's victories included thrashings of Scotland (5:0 at home), Germany (6:0 away), Switzerland (8:1 away), and Hungary (8:2 at home).

Like Hugo, Willy was interested in all matters of sport from an early age. Of the two, however, he was the more talented all-around athlete. He played tennis, boxed, was a champion backstroke swimmer, played in goal for both the Austrian national water polo team and the soccer team of Wiener Amateure (later renamed FK Austria Wien), a team coached by his brother.<sup>3</sup> The two Meisl brothers, along with their older brother Leopold, who was also a successful swimmer, were called up early on in World War I and served as officers in the Austro-Hungarian army. On 16 April 1915, the Vienna *Illustriertes Sportblatt* wrote that all three “were at the theatre of war” (*stehen im Felde*).<sup>4</sup> Contradicting the antisemitic stereotype of the Jews as congenitally unable to properly serve the nation, an accusation which in the German Empire led to their vicious portrayal as war profiteers and shirkers during World War I, the Meisl brothers came back highly decorated for their achievements as soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

Once organized soccer resumed, Willy returned to playing in goal for Austria Vienna and when Hugo took control of the Austrian national team, Willy was even once selected as goalkeeper for an international game against Hungary in 1920. In 1923, after ending his active career, he was hired to coach the Swedish first-division soccer club Hammarby IF. He coached there for two seasons. However, more than for his achievements as a player and coach, Willy Meisl is known for his sports and soccer journalism. Meisl first wrote for the Viennese *Sport-Tagblatt*, his brother’s *Neues Wiener Sportblatt*, for *Der Kicker*, founded in 1920 by the Jewish-German journalist and soccer pioneer Walther Bensemann, and for Sweden and Scandinavia’s biggest paper *Dagens Nyheter*. Following his coverage of the 1924 Paris Summer Olympics, he was hired by Ullstein to write for the *Voss* and other Ullstein publications and he and his wife Rose moved to Berlin.

In early 1934 he and Rose left Germany for exile in England where he had many friends. These included the Anglo-Jewish BBC radio journalist Harold Abrahams, who won the 100-meters at the 1924 Paris Olympics, Chapman, Hogan, and the soccer referee, administrator, and later FIFA president Stanley Rous. Although many specific details about the first years of his exile are unknown, the London *Jewish Chronicle* provides evidence that during the 1930s Meisl supported Zionist causes

in the realm of sport and probably also beyond. He joined the London Maccabi Swimming Club and became goalkeeper of its water polo team, trained the club's competitive swimmers, and served as club chairman.<sup>6</sup> He took on an important role in the Maccabi World Union and assisted with moving its headquarters from Nazi Berlin to the British capital. As secretary of the Maccabi World Union, the main organization of the Zionist sport movement, he provided continuity to this organisation and acted as a liaison between its former functionaries before these were able to emigrate to Israel.<sup>7</sup> His membership in the British Zionist Federation, the original addressee of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, suggests that Meisl's Zionism extended beyond the realm of culture and sport.<sup>8</sup>

When war broke out, Meisl avoided internment by the British authorities and remained at liberty. In 1940 he volunteered to join the British Army and became involved in the war effort against Germany. While in his mid-forties he was considered too old to see active service in the theatre of war, he used his journalistic talents on behalf of psychological warfare operations. Meisl joined the radio and newspaper "black" propaganda unit of the Political Warfare Executive of the British Foreign Office. This was led by the well-known journalist and Germany specialist Sefton Delmer who also ran the Allies' Soldatensender Calais (Soldiers' Radio Calais). From early 1944, he dedicated most of his efforts to writing the sports column for *Nachrichten für die Truppe* (News for the troops), Delmer's propaganda paper directed at German soldiers. With Abrahams and Rous, Meisl also contributed to radio programmes on sport for the BBC Home Service and the General Forces Programme to entertain the home front and English-speaking Allied troops.<sup>9</sup>

Following the war, and with Meisl and his wife having become British citizens in 1947, he remained in London. While he re-established friendly relations with the German world of sports and some of its leading figures, like Carl Diem, the organizer of the 1936 "Nazi" Olympics, he apparently felt no great desire to return to live in either Germany or Austria.<sup>10</sup> He resumed his activities as a sportswriter and served as the London sports correspondent for newspapers in Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany. Having become completely fluent in English, in 1948 he was involved in the writing of the official report of the London Summer Olympics for the British Olympic Committee

(BOC). His main occupation was as writer and editor for the BOC's magazine, *World Sports*. *The International Sports Magazine* which in 1954 accorded him the title "World's No. 1 Soccer Critic". His final book, the 1956 *Soccer Revolution*, explained to British readers the rise of Brazil and the decline of England, respectively, as soccer powers, the latter a topic which had occupied him since the early 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Having moved to Switzerland for the last decade of his life on account of his poor health, Meisl died in Lugano in 1968.

### **The Flourishing of Sports Journalism**

Erik Eggers has suggested that during the Weimar Republic there was a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between the rise of sports as a form of mass culture – what Meisl called the "springtide-like spread of the sports movement" (*springflutartige Ausbreitung der Sportbewegung*) – and the concurrent growth of German sports journalism.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the ascendance of sport as a mass-participation amateur activity, as well as a commercial enterprise directed at a paying mass audience, and the rise of sports writing went hand in hand. In the process, the public's newly found fascination with sports revived the press by helping to improve previously weak circulation figures after World War I, while the development of mass sports strongly benefitted from the intensified coverage in newspapers and sports-specific publications.<sup>13</sup>

As a consequence, much like the writing on cinema, the other leading form of mass culture in the Weimar Republic, sports writing flourished to an unprecedented degree from the 1920s. Kurt Doerry, one of the pioneers of German sports journalism – he was the erstwhile editor-in-chief of *Sport im Bild*, one of the earliest sports magazines of the country founded in 1895 – estimated that the sports press could count on an audience of c. twenty million German readers in 1930, a figure not far off a third of the country's total population of sixty-seven million.<sup>14</sup> In 1925 Meisl could claim that "hardly any paper could do without a sports section whatever its size."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, a "foundation frenzy" for sports publications took hold of the German press in the 1920s. As early as

1920 there were 160 specific sports papers and magazines. By 1928 that figure had risen to 360 publications, which included sixty-nine local, regional, and national newspapers.<sup>16</sup>

The sports sections of the national newspapers often served as a training ground and springboard for younger journalists aiming to write for one of the papers' "important" sections. Many of these struggled to avoid bankruptcy in the troubled economic waters of the 1920s. Even Mosse's *Berliner Tageblatt* and Ullstein's *Voss* faced problems, with the latter incurring seven-figure losses each year and only surviving due to cross-subsidization from the publisher's yellow press paper *BZ am Mittag*.<sup>17</sup> The greatest competition for the readership existed on the booming soccer market. Here the most prominent publications were Bensemann's *Kicker*, for which Meisl wrote at the beginning of his career, and the other soccer weeklies, Ernst Werner's *Fußball-Woche* (founded in Berlin in 1924) and Eugen Seybold's *Fußball* (founded in Munich in 1911).

To write about Meisl means to write about the very top of the profession of sports and soccer journalism in the Weimar Republic. Indicative of his status is that he was thought of by many of his colleagues as the "father of sports journalism" or "king of sports journalists." This was not least because after 1928 he held a position of remarkable power and influence as main sports editor for Ullstein and made the decisions about the sports coverage in the *Voss*, the *BZ am Mittag*, and a plethora of other Ullstein publications, to many of which he also provided articles himself. In a period when sports writing was often either unsigned or signed with letter abbreviations, which makes the identification of authors nowadays sometimes a difficult task, Dr. Willy Meisl enjoyed the privilege of a named weekly column in the *Voss*. From 1926 to early 1934 this appeared mostly on Sundays and meant that he was also known at least by name to readers of this intellectual paper (*Intelligenzblatt*) who had little or no interest in sports. There he reported and reflected upon events in the world of sports under the heading "The Tidings of the Week" (*Was die Woche brachte*). That Meisl used his academic title – he held a doctorate in law – was probably not a coincidence but rather intended to confer respectability to sports journalism. A closer look at his column reveals that it was remarkably international in orientation throughout the eight years of its existence. While the

Voss was a paper for the national market, Meisl's pieces were never Germano-centric but provided snippets of sporting information from all over the globe. And when he covered national sports performances, he could do so rather critically. A good example was how he commented on the German 6:0 defeat at the hand of the "wonder team" in Berlin on 24 May 1931 under the heading "Template Football or Intelligence Game?" Of course, that he used the pronoun "we" on such occasions was purely pragmatic and did not mean that he saw himself as a member of the German national community: "The [German] template switches off the mind, smothers the game. The body takes center-stage. Toughness counts for more than artistry, power for more than ability. Suddenly one notices with horror that our football culture falls apart and that we play awfully primitive."<sup>18</sup>

Soccer's international character as well as its class and nation-transcending appeal allowed Meisl not only to rise to prominence as an Austrian sportswriter in Germany in the 1920s who wrote for not just high-brow publications and the yellow press, but also illustrated magazines with no apparent or exclusive focus on sport. For example, he explained the techniques of playing the ball with the feet to the readership of the satirical *UHU* and commented on heavyweight Max Schmeling's style of boxing for the arts magazine *Der Querschnitt*.<sup>19</sup> His breadth of experience as a writer also made it possible for him to continue his career in London exile after the Nazi regime excluded him from his profession with the *Reichsschriftleitergesetz* which from 1934 banned Jews from writing for German papers. We do not know whether Meisl had the foresight to anticipate the *Anschluss* of 1938 and for that reason did not return to live in Austria, after the Nazis made it impossible for him to make a living in Germany. Instead, he chose England, the "motherland" of sports and soccer, where he was also well-connected, as his country of exile, though for the time being he wrote for Austrian papers.

### **"A Mixture of Statistics, Epic and Poetry"**

Meisl had first risen to prominence with a book on the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris which revolutionised German sports journalism. In it he described the writing technique he used, which set



a broader trend, in the following manner: “It is a mixture of statistics, epic and poetry [eine Mischung aus Statistik, Epik und Lyrik], a sports mixture of course. [...] The contrast injects life. The naked number is boring and kills the lived experience, whereas the epic narrative and the poetic element by themselves do not create a lasting sports document.”<sup>20</sup> Along with textual elements which provided his audience with important factual and numerical information about the outcome of sports competitions, Meisl’s style playfully incorporated and combined reportage, the arts *Feuilleton*, elements from poetry, epic narratives of sport heroism and travel writing.<sup>21</sup> Examples of the latter are his still highly readable impressionistic descriptions of his journey to the 1932 Olympics by ocean liner and rail across North America, as well as of the host city Los Angeles, the Olympic venues and sports stadia.<sup>22</sup>

But there was more to this self-characterization. The insistence on the combination of these factors can be interpreted as a metaphor for Meisl’s understanding of sport more generally. It reflected his romanticizing outlook on sport that its very essence could be found in the enjoyment it provided through the unconstrained movement of the body in nature: “Sport is the joy in oneself, one’s body and its play in the sun, the light and air, to stretch oneself in sport. Sport is the storing up of energy and its waste in a blazing performance. It’s delight and joy, fresh pleasure.”<sup>23</sup> Sentences like these betray Meisl’s closeness to ideas of the turn-of-the-century German “life reform movement” which with its emphasis on body-consciousness, health and beauty reflected both the anxieties and opportunities of the inhabitants of a country undergoing rapid industrialization and modernization.<sup>24</sup>

Meisl’s view contrasted starkly with a Fordist and Taylorist interpretation of sport and the human body, which primarily valorised measurable and quantifiable performance. This interpretation, which was equally widespread and popular, linked sport to visions of US-style rationalization, assembly line production and mass consumption.<sup>25</sup> This machine-age interpretation, usually associated with the beginnings of Americanization in Germany after World War I, also harmonized with the aesthetics of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). This in turn made sport an

important topic of interest for artists and literary authors like Bertolt Brecht, who wrote a short chapter for Meisl's *Sport am Scheidewege*, and fellow Austrians Joseph Roth and Robert Musil, who all saw sport's rise as indicative, and not always in a good way, of the spirit of the age.<sup>26</sup>

Meisl's deep skepticism of this view of sport is particularly evident in his critique of the omnipresent striving for records. As he put it in *Sport am Scheidewege*: "The record should not be achieved for its own sake, and attempting to set a record is damaging, a blasphemy against the idea of sport."<sup>27</sup> His discussion of this problem on the radio in July 1929 with Alex Natan, a prominent Jewish-German sprinter, who with Berlin's SC Charlottenburg 4x100-meter relay squad had just equalled the world-record, was summarized by the *Voss*:

Dr Meisl, who took on the mantle of the prosecutor, attacked the type of record and record mania that results from the abstract joy of the technical functioning of the body machine and the fight for every tenth of a second and centimetre. Beauty, however, could be found in the record which came about by accident and "freely" in competition. For the defence, Natan emphasized the invigorating and energising effect of every peak performance, even if achieved "against the clock."<sup>28</sup>

Another area which is illustrative of Meisl's thinking on sport concerns the question of amateurism. Along with many of his generation, he was a defender of the amateur principle in soccer and sport more generally. After all, he himself had played soccer for an amateur club. Whereas professional soccer had already existed for half a century on the British Isles, it only received a boost on the continent in the 1920s, though not in Germany where it was denounced by the soccer association DFB and the "selfless amateur" was glorified like a war hero.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, it was Willy's brother Hugo who was the driving force behind the first Austrian professional league in Vienna in 1924. On occasion of the FIFA congress in 1928, this led the *Fußball-Woche* to conflate the professionalization of soccer with "the slyness (Geschmeidigkeit) of [Hugo Meisl's Jewish] race and its degenerate (zersetzend) spirit."<sup>30</sup>

Notwithstanding such antisemitic statements, Willy Meisl wrote rather apodictically in *Sport am Scheidewege* that "[i]f sport becomes a profession [...] it stops being sport."<sup>31</sup> That said, he could not avoid being realistic either. He therefore never elevated amateurism to an absolute principle and pointed out that it was extremely difficult to draw a clear line between amateur and professional

sport.<sup>32</sup> For Meisl, the age of pure amateurism had come to an end at the very moment “when for the first time an entry fee was charged at a sports ground.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he strongly sympathized with working class athletes who made a living from sports, as, of course, he did himself as a sports writer. Along those lines he coined the ironic epigram: “The best amateurism is a rich father.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Soccer and Austrian Patriotism**

On 7 December 1932 one of the most famous international soccer friendlies ever took place at FC Chelsea’s home ground in West London in front of some 60,000 spectators. The match, for which Stanley Rous acted as a linesman, pitted England against Austria. After an overall balanced performance from both teams, the Austrians lost narrowly, after having been down by two goals from the twenty-seventh minute. As the London *Times* wrote about the English 4:3 victory: “[I]t was by no means easily earned. [...] With a little luck [the Austrians] might have [...] made a draw of the match.”<sup>35</sup> The crowd at Stamford Bridge included thousands of Austrian fans in red-white-red colours who had travelled to London just for the occasion. The live radio broadcast by the Austrian radio corporation RAVAG, which for the first time was transmitted by undersea cable between Britain and the continent, was followed all over Central and East-Central Europe, including by a huge local audience on Vienna’s Heldenplatz.

The match marked the climax of the “wonder team” and ended its unbeaten run. The invitation to play in London was testament to the esteem in which the Austrian team was held at the time. It was only the third team to have been invited to play England at home, with the highly rated Spain suffering a 7:1 hammering in 1931. This meant that the pressure on the Austrian players was quite high, as there was a good chance the encounter might end with an embarrassing defeat. Previous matches had overall been clearly won by England, 6:1 and 11:1 in 1908, 8:1 in 1909, with a goalless draw in 1930.

The match was built up by the continental press as the “match of the century” (*Jahrhundertspiel*), as the best continental team challenged the originators of the sport.

Paradoxically, the Austrian defeat was celebrated as if it was a victory. This was because the narrow outcome could be interpreted as continental soccer having finally succeeded in emancipating itself from its original model and offering a new model for imitation.<sup>36</sup> The match pitted two soccer styles and philosophies against each other: the patient, fluid, technically refined and short-passing combination game of Hogan's 2-3-5 "Vienna school" formation versus the physically more robust and quicker long-range kick-and-rush game of Herbert Chapman's 3-2-2-3 (W-M) formation with an extra defender. With it, Chapman led Arsenal to its first silverware with the FA Cup in 1930 and two league titles in 1931 and 1933. In essence, this was a battle between offensive elegance and defensive pragmatism.<sup>37</sup>

Like other experts Meisl understood the outcome of the match to be indicative of that continental soccer had caught up with the English game, if not outdone it. He covered it in the *Voss* in a text which is exemplary of his highly rhetorical style. Here he contrasted England's "spiritless" "soccer routine" style of playing with the "dancelike and gracious" Austrian way of play: "The creatively assembled orchestra trumped the great concert machine. The English soccer 'gramophone' plays many records beautifully, but the Austrian football collective can play without rehearsing and improvise random variations."<sup>38</sup> These were not the lines of a dispassionate observer but rather an expression of Meisl's Austrian patriotism and pride in his Jewish identity. Not only did he root for an Austrian team for which he had played himself and which his brother, a Viennese Jew, coached, but he also identified with the nation that the "wonder team" represented. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, another Viennese Jew, some 20 years younger than Meisl, beautifully summarized soccer's ability to create a sense of national belonging when reflecting on the previous 1930 England vs. Austria encounter: "What has made football so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is that the [...] imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of 11 named people."<sup>39</sup>

Not surprisingly, the memory of the match stayed with Meisl until the end of his life. He was not alone in this. Matthias Marschik accords this Austrian defeat in 1932 a similar importance as a

formative moment for Austrian national identity in the First Republic to the West German victory over Hungary some two decades later in the 1954 World Cup final for the young Federal Republic.<sup>40</sup> The reception both teams received upon their return was certainly strikingly similar, with thousands accompanying their train journey back from the Austrian and German borders and hundreds of thousands celebrating their arrival in Vienna and Munich, respectively.<sup>41</sup>

Eleven years later, Meisl thought the match important enough to use its memory on behalf of the British war effort. In a radio propaganda address written for the Political Warfare Executive and directed “To the Austrians”, he prompted his audience on 8 December 1943 to remember the First Republic before Austria had become a “Nazi arsenal,” “Prussian barracks” and “colony of the Reich” and of the day when “eleven Austrians took England by storm and created mutual appreciation, closer relations and friendship” between the two nations.<sup>42</sup> In a 1941 article for the antifascist *Free Austria* magazine he also reminded the 30,000 strong exile community of his countrymen in the United Kingdom of the “wonder team” and expressed his “hope that Austria will again be able to lead or at least to march with the vanguard” in soccer after the war.<sup>43</sup> Austria, of course, never again became the soccer power it had been in the 1920s and 1930s, in part because it was annexed, and afterwards overshadowed. With the *Anschluss* Austria had lost its status as premier German soccer nation to the later developing but much larger (West) Germany.

### **Assimilationism and Zionism**

Given the size and importance of Viennese Jewry and the fact that Theodor Herzl, the “father of Zionism,” spent most of his career as a journalist, writer, and political activist in the Austrian capital, it is unsurprising that several Jewish sports clubs existed in interwar Vienna and that these held differing views on Jewish assimilation and separateness. Two of them shared a strong mutual dislike which occasionally even spilled over into street brawls. Hugo and Willy Meisl belonged to Wiener Amateure/Austria Wien which was the club of the assimilated bourgeois Viennese Jewry. It could rely on support and sponsorship from the local wealthy Jewish middle class, but its membership was

also open to non-Jews. The other club, Hakoah Vienna, brought together the Viennese Zionists and only accepted Jews as members, except coaching staff.<sup>44</sup>

Founded only in 1909, Hakoah grew rapidly in size and stature in the interwar years and won Austrian national titles in a variety of sports, from wrestling to swimming to water polo and athletics. As mentioned above, in 1923 it convincingly beat West Ham United, and in 1925 the club famously took the Austrian soccer league title with an all-Jewish team.<sup>45</sup> The Hakoah athlete and writer Friedrich Torberg (1908–1979), like Meisl a decade or so earlier a part of the Austrian national water polo team, articulated his pride in having been a member of the club with its blue and white colours and the Star of David on its kit, at the time when Hakoah asserted itself in Austrian sports: “I had the invaluable luck of having never – not even a second – been ‘ashamed’ of being Jewish. What should I have been ashamed of? That Jews scored more goals, swam faster and boxed better than others?”<sup>46</sup>

Willy Meisl shared Torberg’s pride in his Jewish background and in contrast to his brother Hugo he also showed an appreciation of Hakoah’s successes and once called the club “the greatest creative achievement of Viennese Jewry.”<sup>47</sup> This explains why he never hesitated to combat the antisemitic stereotype of the physically deficient Jews. In 1925, for example, he wrote an article entitled “Jüdische Champions” (Jewish Champions) for the magazine *Der Schild* of the patriotic German Reich Federation of Jewish Front Soldiers (*Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*), of which he may have been a member himself.<sup>48</sup> It emphasized the historic achievements of Jewish athletes. That the article was published in *Der Schild* is testament to that while Meisl shared some of Zionism’s ideas, he then saw himself predominantly as a member of the bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) sports movement. While his Jewish readers might not have needed such reminders, the same did not necessarily apply to the readership of the *Voss*. There he stood up twice in 1933 against antisemitism. With the Nazi stormtroopers arbitrarily beating up and arresting political opponents after 30 January 1933, he no doubt took a significant risk to his own personal safety on both occasions.

In June 1933, the veteran sportswriter Walther Bensemann was pushed out as editor of *Der Kicker* because he was a Jew, even though he had already announced his retirement from the magazine for shortly afterwards.<sup>49</sup> From 1920 onwards he had toiled tirelessly to make *Der Kicker* the most important soccer magazine in Germany, arguably also making it the most important in Europe at the time, if not the world. After having dedicated his entire life and personal fortune to soccer, Bensemann was made to die penniless as a broken man in Swiss exile in Montreux in November 1934 less than a year-and-a-half later. Not holding back but choosing his words wisely, Meisl used his weekly column in the *Voss* to comment and deplore his forced retirement, while praising Bensemann's life-long efforts on behalf of the sport:

Bigger things are moving the world, more important things are decided in and about Germany. The individual though needs to act in their circle to vouch for honesty and purity, decency, and gratefulness. In this circle Walther Bensemann's exit from *his* magazine "*Der Kicker*" will be noted with painful regret.<sup>50</sup>

In another article in the *Voss* in April 1933, which repeated the main points of his contributions for *Der Schild*, Meisl pointed to flaws in Nazi racial ideology by emphasizing Jewish prowess in all kinds of sports from boxing to athletics to tennis and ice-hockey. "From 'Danny' Mendoza to Carr" started with the ironically understated, laconic sentence: "Perhaps the history of Jewish sports is of particular interest to wider sports circles today."<sup>51</sup> In what followed, Meisl provided a tour-de-force in examples of Jewish athletic achievements through the ages, including the late eighteenth-century Anglo-Jewish Sephardic heavyweight prize fighter and leading up to his own present, as represented by the Jewish-American runner Bill Carr, the 400-meter gold medallist at the 1932 Olympics. To emphasize the relevance of his argument for contemporary Germany, he also included references to prominent contemporary Jewish-German athletes like the tennis players Daniel Prenn and Ilse Friedleben; the boxers Harry Stein, Felix Friedemann and Erich Selig; and the sprinters Alex Natan, Fritz Gerber and Georg and Oskar Kurz.

While as a Jew Meisl himself was primarily an exponent of Austrian-German culture, it appears that he left behind his belief in Jewish assimilation when in exile. Not that the difference between assimilationism and Zionism had been so dramatic in the interwar years to begin with, but

with the Nazi seizure of power it had become obsolete. It is therefore unsurprising that Meisl collaborated from London several times with the Zionist journalist and author Felix Daniel Pinczower (1901–1993). Pinczower is best known for his 1937 *Der jüdische Läufer* (The Jewish Runner) which he wrote in response to the exclusion of German Jews from the 1936 Berlin Olympics. In it he presented the reader somewhat anachronistically and uncritically with numerous examples of runners from the Hebrew Bible and the Mishnah.<sup>52</sup> Pinczower and Meisl jointly published several newspaper articles in Zionist papers and contributed the chapter on sport to Siegmund Kaznelson's encyclopaedic study *Juden im deutschen Kulturbereich* (Jews in the German Cultural Orbit).<sup>53</sup> The book was commissioned to Kaznelson by Leopold Ullstein, one of the scions of the eponymous publishing family. With more than forty chapters covering the Jewish contributions to every conceivable aspect of German culture from literature to nuclear physics, it was intended as a "response to the Nazi attempt to discredit the Jews and cast them as a parasitic alien people."<sup>54</sup> As the Nazi authorities banned its publication after seeing the proofs, its first edition only saw the light of day in 1959.

### **"They Seized Power Through Gymnastics"**

While embracing Austrian patriotism and Zionism, Meisl was extremely critical of German aggressive nationalism. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, he thought that the rise of Hitler was to a large extent due to German *Turnen* (gymnastics) and dedicated an entire book entitled *Sie turnten zur Macht* to the relationship between this system of bodily practices and German nationalism.<sup>55</sup> For Meisl, German gymnastics was the "crèche of the hardest nationalism, the primary school of chauvinism." This was due to the "German negation of the individual and their freedom" which was exemplified in the "emphasis of the group and annulment of the individual 'on behalf' of the community" which German *Turnen* had advocated from the early nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

*Turnen* – the word itself was a German neologism by its creator Friedrich Jahn intended to replace the Greek term gymnastics – was different from sport in that its original emphasis was not on individual bodily improvement and competition but on the collective achievement of the



gymnastics squad (*Turnriege*), which was meant to represent the nation in its entirety. With the concurrent rise of English sports in the nineteenth century, this led to a split between the *Turner* movement and the German advocates of “English sports” who were part of international developments like the Olympic movement. That said, German sports functionaries, like, most prominently, Diem were not necessarily significantly less nationalistic than the *Turner*, a fact that Meisl tended to forgive and forget.

However, he certainly had a point in that *Turnen* was closely associated with the birth of the German nationalist movement against a French enemy during the Napoleonic Wars. Svenja Goltermann has shown how the nineteenth-century German *Turner* movement employed bodily exercise as a tool for national improvement and means to incorporate and embody German national identity.<sup>57</sup> Meisl was also right in also pointing his finger at the *Deutsche Turnerschaft*, the main organization of the movement, as its leader in the interwar period Edmund Neuendorff was a convinced Nazi and led many of its members to support National Socialism.<sup>58</sup> However, the monocausal explanation *They seized power through gymnastics* offered for the rise of Nazism carried with it the deficits of all histories that reduce complex historical processes to a single factor. This probably explains why the book never saw the light of day and only small parts of it ever came out as newspaper articles.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to show how through his journalism, Willy Meisl not only played an important part in satisfying the German public’s insatiable appetite for press coverage of international sports events, but also expressed his Austrian patriotism and Jewish pride alongside articulating his basic understanding of sport. Moreover, Meisl occasionally used the genre of sports journalism, of which he was one of the most creative exponents, to fight aggressive German nationalism and antisemitism through an emphasis on sports internationalism and by defending the Jews against the accusation of being physically deficient.

The essay's most important point however is a less direct one. The example of the Austrian "father of (German) sports journalism" shows how "the German soccer nation" has always been a contested notion. In fact, throughout the history of the sport in the German-speaking world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries one really needs to speak about "German soccer nations." For Meisl, it was Austria, not Germany that was at the center of the German-speaking soccer world until after World War II, promoting tactical innovations, professionalism, Jewish players, internationalism, and, probably including himself, innovative sports writing. In this context, his identification with the Austrian *Wunderteam* is a vivid testament to the many ways in which soccer nations might be constructed and at times mythologized.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (London, New York, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Christian Koller, "Transnationalität: Netzwerke, Wettbewerbe, Migration," in *Fußball zwischen den Kriegen. Europa 1918–1939*, ed. Koller and Fabian Brändle (Münster, 2010), 60–63.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Eggers, "Revolutionär und Prophet. Willy Meisl (1895–1968)," in *"Sind's froh, dass Sie zu Hause geblieben sind": Die Mediatisierung des Sports in Österreich*, ed. Matthias Marschik and Rudolf Müllner (Göttingen, 2010), 180.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Andreas und Wolfgang Hafer, *Hugo Meisl oder: die Erfindung des modernen Fußballs* (Göttingen, 2007), 70. All translations are by the author.

<sup>5</sup> On the different treatment of Jews in the German and Habsburg imperial armies, see Michael Berger, *Eisernes Kreuz – Doppeladler – Davidstern. Juden in deutschen und österreichisch-ungarischen Armeen. Der Militärdienst jüdischer Soldaten durch zwei Jahrhunderte* (Berlin, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle*, 25 October 1935, 42, 15 September 1939, 29 and 21 June 1968, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 December 1936.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 February 1949.

<sup>9</sup> See the radio manuscripts "Under Nazi Rule" for the BBC Home Service (10 March 1940) and "Sportsmen's Corner" for the General Forces Programme (21 June 1944) at Deutsche Sporthochschule (DSHS) Köln, Olympic Studies Center, Willy Meisl Collection. These files form part of a very small number of surviving Meisl papers, with the rest considered lost.

<sup>10</sup> See the voluminous exchange of letters between Meisl and Diem from the 1920s onwards in DSHS Köln, Carl und Liselott Diem Archiv, Diem Korrespondenz, Meisl, Willy.

<sup>11</sup> Meisl, *Soccer Revolution. Great Britain Taught the World How to Play and Enjoy Association Football – Later to Be Taught Many a Hard Lesson by Former Pupils* (London, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> Meisl (ed.), *Der Sport am Scheidewege* (Heidelberg, 1928), 20; see Eggers, "Die Geschichte der Sportpublizistik in Deutschland, Teil 1 (bis 1945): Von der Turnpresse im 19. Jahrhundert zur gleichgeschalteten Sportpresse im 'Dritten Reich'," in *Handbuch Medien, Kommunikation und Sport*, ed. Thomas Schierl (Schorndorf, 2006), 10–24.

<sup>13</sup> Eggers, "'Deutsch wie der Sport, so auch das Wort!' Zur Scheinblüte der Fußballpublizistik im Dritten Reich," in *Fußball zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus: Alltag, Medien, Künste, Stars*, ed. Markwart Herzog (Stuttgart, 2008), 162.

<sup>14</sup> Doerry, "Sportpresse und Sportberichterstattung," in *Athletik: Ein Handbuch der lebenswichtigen Leibesübungen*, ed. Carl Krümmel (Munich, 1930), 577.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Eggers, "Deutsch wie der Sport, so auch das Wort," 162.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–163.

- <sup>17</sup> Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford, New York, 2009), 30.
- <sup>18</sup> Meisl, "Schablonen-Fußball oder Intelligenz-Spiel? Was die Woche brachte," *Vossische Zeitung*, 31 May 1931.
- <sup>19</sup> Meisl, "Der UHU-Sport des Monats: Fußball," *UHU* 5.12 (September 1929), 68–70 and "Schmelings Knockout-Rezept," *Der Querschnitt* VIII.2 (February 1928), 122–124.
- <sup>20</sup> Meisl, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1924 in Wort, Bild, Statistik* (Oldenburg i. O., 1924), 5.
- <sup>21</sup> Eggers, "Deutsch wie der Sport, so auch das Wort," 162.
- <sup>22</sup> Meisl, "Auf dem Weg zu Olympia," *Vossische Zeitung*, 17 July 1932, "Amerikanische Eindrücke," *Vossische Zeitung*, 7 August 1932 and "Rund um Olympia," *Vossische Zeitung*, 14 August 1932.
- <sup>23</sup> Meisl, *Der Sport am Scheidewege*, 131.
- <sup>24</sup> Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany. A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago, London, 2003), 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Frank Becker, "Der Sportler als 'moderner Menschentyp'. Entwürfe für eine neue Körperlichkeit," in *Körper mit Geschichte: der menschliche Körper als Ort der Selbst- und Weltdeutung*, ed. Clemens Wischermann and Stefan Haas (Stuttgart, 2000), 225.
- <sup>26</sup> See Brecht, "Die Krise des Sports," in *Der Sport am Scheidewege*, ed. Meisl, 144–46 and Anne Fleig, *Körperkultur und Moderne: Robert Musils Ästhetik des Sports* (Berlin, New York, 2008).
- <sup>27</sup> Meisl, *Der Sport am Scheidewege*, 75.
- <sup>28</sup> "Rundfunk: Rekord," *Vossische Zeitung*, 24 July 1929; on Natan see Kay Schiller, "Der schnellste Jude Deutschlands" – Sport, Moderne und (Körper-)politik im bewegten Leben Alex Natans (1906–1971)," *Stadion. International Journal of the History of Sport* 43, no. 2 (2019): 185–218.
- <sup>29</sup> Christiane Eisenberg, *"English Sports" und deutsche Bürger: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1800–1939* (Paderborn, 1999), 337.
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted in Nils Havemann, *Fußball unterm Hakenkreuz. Der DFB zwischen Sport, Politik und Kommerz* (Frankfurt, 2005), 161.
- <sup>31</sup> Meisl, *Der Sport am Scheidewege*, 56.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Times*, 8 December 1932.
- <sup>36</sup> Hafer, *Hugo Meisl*, 249.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>38</sup> Meisl, "Fußball ohne Geist," *Vossische Zeitung*, 11 December 1931.
- <sup>39</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780* (Cambridge, 1991), 143.
- <sup>40</sup> Marschik, "Wiener Melange: Fußball in Österreich 1918–1939," in *Fußball zwischen den Kriegen*, 258.
- <sup>41</sup> Hafer, *Hugo Meisl*, 250; see Markwart Herzog, "Win Globally – Party Locally: The 'Miracle of Berne' and Its Local Reception," in *The FIFA World Cup 1930–2010. Politics, Commerce, Spectacle, and Identities*, ed. Stefan Rinke and Schiller (Göttingen, 2014), 125–41.
- <sup>42</sup> Meisl, "An die Österreicher," 8 November 1943, DSHS Köln, Olympic Studies Center, Willy Meisl Collection.
- <sup>43</sup> Meisl, "The 'Wonder' Team," *Free Austria. Monthly Review of the Austria Office* 2, no. 1 (October 1941), 9.
- <sup>44</sup> Bernhard Hachleitner, Marschik, and Georg Spitaler, *Sportfunktionäre und jüdische Differenz: Zwischen Anerkennung und Antisemitismus – Wien 1918 bis 1938* (Berlin, 2018), 246.
- <sup>45</sup> See John Bunzl, "Hakoah Vienna: Reflections on a Legend," in *Emancipation through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe*, ed. Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni (Lincoln, 2006), 106–15 and William D. Bowman, "Hakoah Vienna and the International Nature of Interwar Austrian Sports," *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 642–68.
- <sup>46</sup> Quoted in Hafer, *Hugo Meisl*, 32.
- <sup>47</sup> Quoted in Hajo Bernett, "Der Aufstieg der jüdischen Sportbewegung und ihre Zerschlagung durch das Hitlerregime," in *Hakoah. Ein jüdischer Sportverein in Wien 1909–1995*, ed. Jüdisches Museum Wien (Vienna, 1995), 79.
- <sup>48</sup> Meisl, "Jüdische Champions," *Der Schild. Zeitschrift des Reichsbundes jüdischer Frontsoldaten e.V.* 4, no. 34, 27 November 1925, 436; see also Meisl, "Die Juden im Sport," *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* 18, no. 5 (May 1928): 127–130 and 23 no. 7 (July 1933): 213–218.
- <sup>49</sup> Bernd M. Beyer, *Der Mann, der den Fußball nach Deutschland brachte. Das Leben des Walther Bensemann. Ein biografischer Roman* (Göttingen, 2014), 398.
- <sup>50</sup> Meisl, "Was die Woche brachte," *Vossische Zeitung*, 4 June 1933.
- <sup>51</sup> Meisl, "Von 'Danny' Mendoza bis Carr," *Vossische Zeitung*, 16 April 1933.

<sup>52</sup> Ofer Ashkenazi, "German Jewish Athletes and the Formation of Zionist (Trans-)National Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2011): 134 and Moshe Zimmermann, "Die Antike als Erinnerungsarsenal. Vorbilder des jüdischen Sports," in *Populäre Konstruktionen von Erinnerung im deutschen Judentum und nach der Emigration*, ed. Yotam Hotam and Joachim Jacob (Göttingen, 2004), 38–39.

<sup>53</sup> Meisl and Pinczower, "Sport," in *Juden im deutschen Kulturbereich*, ed. Kaznelson (Berlin, 1959), 926–36.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Jews Within German Culture," in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*. Vol. 4: *Renewal and Destruction 1918–1945*, ed. Avraham Barkai and Mendes-Flohr (New York, 1998), 193.

<sup>55</sup> Meisl, *Sie turnten zur Macht*, DSHS Köln, Olympic Studies Center, Willy Meisl Collection.

<sup>56</sup> Meisl, "Politisches Ethos im Sport. Deutsche Teilnahme an den Olympischen Spielen," *Göttinger Universitäts-Zeitung* 2, no. 10, 25 April 1947.

<sup>57</sup> See Svenja Goltermann, *Körper der Nation. Habitusformierung und die Politik des Turnens 1860–1890* (Göttingen, 1998) and "Exercise and Perfection: Embodying the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 11, no. 3 (2004): 333–46.

<sup>58</sup> Horst Ueberhorst, *Edmund Neuendorff. Turnführer ins Dritte Reich* (Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, 1970), 7.