CHAPTER 1

What Ray Arcell Saw in the Shower

Victór Galíndez, Mike Rossman, and the Two Fights that Put an End to Jewish Boxing

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Boxing was Jewish. In Buenos Aires, Philadelphia, and dozens of other cities and towns in the Americas where Jewish immigrants arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and constituted a significant working class, Jewish kids boxed. They did so for reasons similar to – but at the same time some distance from – those the historian Raanan Rein identifies as the reasons why Villa Crespo Jews in Buenos Aires saw their identities bound up with the Atlanta football club.¹ Sport functioned as an identity bridge. For Jewish immigrants who aspired to neighborhood, urban, or national integration or simply fell into it, both football and boxing offered a cultural fist-in-the-door to local identities that transcended but did not excise Jewish identity. A fourteen-year-old Jewish kid fighting his afternoons away in the local gym on the Main in 1920s Montreal, or in the La Paternal neighborhood of Buenos Aires, though somewhat similar, isn’t quite the same as the sort of identity transformation and allegiance generated by game-day rituals around preparing for and attending a football match. Boxing is (and was constructed as) physical and psychological commitment to a rarified extreme. It hurts in ways that other sports do not. Psychologically, culturally, and physically, it reflects the sort of hurt that other activities do not. It can imbue heightened masculinity, power, and other constructed identities in ways that other sports cannot.²

Two fights under consideration here reflect the end of Jewish boxing in the Americas sometime before the 1970s. In September 1978, Mike “The Jewish Bomber” Rossman stunned the boxing world at the Superdome in New Orleans by taking the World Light Heavyweight Championship (World Boxing

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Association, WBA) from the Argentine Victor Galíndez in a thirteenth-round TKO. In April of the following year, the two fighters were back in the Superdome and this time the better boxer, Galíndez, made no mistakes, winning back his title when a bloodied Rossman retired in the ninth. Two years before the first of the New Orleans fights, and a very long four years away from his winning the WBA Super Bantamweight World Championship, the Argentine boxer Sergio Victor Palma saw Sylvester Stallone’s film “Rocky,” not long after it had been first screened. More than thirty years later, he loved Darren Aronofsky’s film “The Wrestler,” and particularly the work of the actor Mickey Rourke, for precisely the same reasons he had identified so closely with Stallone’s Rocky Balboa.3

More than most sports (though perhaps not more so than wrestling), the intimacy of the boxer’s narrative – what ties events in the ring to how a boxer’s life is cast – counts to those who care about the sport. It is in the intimacy of the briefly intersecting boxers’ narratives that Galíndez–Rossman I and II tell a good story about the end of Jewish boxing. Neither knew it, but both were at the end of their careers. Neither would win another important fight. Galíndez was killed in a bizarre car-racing accident two years later. Rossman followed an iconic boxer’s fall from grace (and perhaps from Jewish identity) in the decade after New Orleans. He had petty run-ins with the law over drug and gun possession; perhaps worse still for his Jewish mother – who had once harbored dreams of her son the “doctor” or the “lawyer,” and like the Irish-American world champion James Braddock – Rossman found work after boxing as a day laborer. With the help of a patron from Atlantic City whose reach extended into two Cold War era hallmarks of the New Jersey boxing world – organized crime and organized labor – Rossman joined Local 30 of the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers, and Allied Workers.4
