



IN THE RING

KID LEWIS.

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For many working class poor, especially among recent immigrants to England, the only foreseeable path out of a blighted urban existence was the ring, where at least among fellow fighters, ethnic and religious tensions were virtually unknown. In the 1910s - 50s Jews made indelible marks in the annals of boxing history with such world class champions as Ted 'Kid' Lewis and Jack 'Kid' Berg, nationally acclaimed fighters as Harry Mizler, Harry Mason and Lew Lazar, and countless lesser known professionals and amateur pugilists.

Ted 'Kid' Lewis (aka Gershon Mendeloff) was born on 28 October, 1893 on Umerston Street, St. George's-in-the-East to Russian immigrant parents. While Ted's parents, having witnessed the slaughter of relatives and friends during terrible pogroms, encouraged their son to turn the other cheek when faced with anti-Semitic taunts by local street gangs, Ted and his Jewish friends decided to form their own gangs in order to respond with great ferocity to their tormentors. After being stopped during a fight by a policeman, Ted was encouraged to take his battles to the local Judean Club, which was located off Cable Street in Princes Square, where he was actually paid for doling out a beating. By the time he turned 18, Ted had graduated to fighting at some of London's top venues, including Wonderland, just off Whitechapel Road, Premierland, on Back Church Lane and the Ring at Blackfriars.

Lewis then went on to become one of Britain's greatest fighters, winning the British flyweight championship in 1913, for which he was awarded the highly coveted Lonsdale Belt, the world welterweight championship in 1915 and the British and European middleweight titles in 1921, before retiring after knocking out Johnny Basham in the third round in December 1929.

Jack 'Kid' Berg, the 'Whitechapel Whirlwind' was born Judah Bergman on 28 June, 1909 in Cable Street to recent immigrants from Poland. His father was

vehemently opposed to Jack's early forays in the ring. As an Orthodox Jew, he was following the traditional rabbinical view that to engage in physical sport demonstrated *goyische midos* (mores of the heathen). But, like his idol, Ted 'Kid' Lewis, young Jack was a tough scrapper. Not only did he nearly always throw the first punch to defend himself, he also frequently came to the aid of other kids and elderly Jews, who by virtue of their traditional appearance were the victims of anti-Semitic taunts. Thus, Jack became a local hero of sorts, well before his professional boxing career began.

Little did his parents know that young Yiddle (little Jew), as Jack was called by his friends, would parlay his early street fighting experience and his training at the Oxford and St. George's club on Betts Street into capturing the British lightweight and world junior welterweight titles, thus becoming one of the most admired and respected Jewish boxers of the 1920s and 30s, as well as a dashing celebrity who brushed shoulders

with the likes of blonde bombshell actress, Mae West, and notorious gangsters, Legs Diamond and Jack 'Spot' Comer. This outcome could not have been anticipated when, after his first professional bout in 1923, Jack brought his mother a fistful of shillings. Indeed, it was the norm for young Jewish fighters to bring home the entire proceeds from their fights, as the take from one night would easily exceed the weekly income of the average working-class Jewish family.

Like some of his Jewish compatriots, for example, Harry Mizler, Berg wore a prominent *magen David* on his boxing trunks while fighting. To further dramatize his Jewish heritage, Jack also donned *tefillin* before his fights. He didn't do this out of religious zeal or ethnic pride, but rather, to whip his Jewish fans into a frenzy of support, especially against Italian or Irish-American opponents.

Jack's boxing career reached its peak when he wrested the world junior welterweight championship from fellow Jew, the American-born Mushy Callahan (born Vincent Morris Scheer) by a technical knockout in a gruelling match fought on 18 February, 1930 at London's Albert Hall. Although he lost his title on 10 September, 1931 in a heartbreaking decision against Tony Canzoneri, Berg was far from finished as a fighter. Indeed he went on to capture the British lightweight championship in 1934 against a fellow East End Jew, Harry Mizler, and ended his career in 1945 at the ripe old age of 36 with a knockout victory against Johnny McDonald. During his boxing career and after his retirement, Jack pursued acting, and was featured in such films as *Money Talks* (1933) and *The Square Ring* (1953), as well as appearing as a stuntman in numerous major Hollywood productions.

Today, England claims but a handful of Jewish fighters, most of whom are recent immigrants from Israel and the former Soviet Union.

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BOXER TO BE OPERA HERO

Howard Fredrics started researching the life of his cousin Jack Berg when he moved to London from the US in 2003, and was inspired to compose an opera based on the boxer's life. *The Whitechapel Whirlwind*, created with American writer, Jacob Sager Weinstein, is currently slated for a premiere performance in excerpted form at one of London's foremost boxing venues, York Hall as part of a weekend long Boxing Extravaganza in 2005 under the sponsorship of the Jewish East End Celebration Society (JEECS). From this event, JEECS hopes to develop support for the preservation and restoration of important buildings as well as cultural and religious institutions in the East End, with activities leading to the eventual creation of a cultural centre. It is hoped to feature in this a British Boxing Hall of Fame, in which Jews will no doubt hold a central place.