

# The Great Karpati

By Sandor Slomovits

Twenty-nine years ago, eleven Israeli wrestlers and officials were murdered at the Munich Olympics. The tragedy brought up decades-old anger and pain for my parents, both of whom are Holocaust survivors who lost many family members in the concentration camps. “Only at a German Olympics could this have happened,” my father said sourly, even questioning whether the Germans deliberately allowed it to occur. Then he went on to tell me this story.



Illustration by Caryl Herzfeld

In the 1930s my father lived with his first wife and their three small children in Kunhegyes, a small town about an hour from Budapest, where he served as cantor, teacher and rabbi to the 120 Jewish families in that community. In 1937 he traveled to the

city of Debrecen to audition for a position in a larger synagogue. Following Friday night services, as he was talking with some of the congregants, he mentioned that he was staying at the Nemzeti Kasino Hotel. Several in the group immediately advised him not to walk there after dark, as roving bands of anti-Semitic

students had been beating Jews. Suddenly, a man spoke up, “I’ll walk him there. He’ll be safe.”

My father looked at the speaker skeptically. At first glance, he did not appear to be an impressive physical specimen, no taller than my father’s 5 foot 5 inches. But a second look revealed a thickly muscled neck, wider than his head, and the arms-akimbo stance of a powerful weight lifter or

wrestler. He was two-time Olympian, Karpati-Karoly.

Karpati was famous throughout Hungary, and especially among Jews, for having won the silver medal in the light-weight division of freestyle wrestling in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, and the gold medal in the same event in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

Born Klein-Karoly, he had assumed the Magyar name Karpati, to disguise his Jewishness, thus allowing him to wrestle in Berlin despite the anti-Semitic atmosphere at those Games. He was reputed to have said before his final match in Berlin, “I will come out of this ring the Olympic champion, or I will be carried out dead.” He was not a man to duck a fight and, in fact, seemed eager to find one.

My father and he set off together. My father was easily identifiable as a Jew by his black hat, beard and *payot*. Karpati, though also a devout Jew, wore a nondescript cap and had short hair. As they neared the hotel, a half dozen students – their courage amplified and their judgment clouded by drink – attacked my father and the Olympic champion.

Karpati was obviously as well versed in the rough and tumble of street fighting as in the more stylized holds of Olympic wrestling. While my father stood by and watched, he grabbed two of the gang and, in an astonishing display of power and athletic skill, used them as cudgels to beat the others, routing the whole band.

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My father did not get the job in Debrecen, and after that night he didn't see Karpati for five years. They met again in the Munkaszolgalot, the forced labor crews of Jews attached to the Hungarian and German armies. My father had been ordered into the Munkaszolgalot in 1942. Karpati, as an Olympic champion and national hero, had been exempted at first, along with Jewish veterans who had served with distinction in World War I. But by 1943 all exemptions were banned and Karpati wound up in the same camp as my father in Nadvirna, Poland.

My father, of course, immediately recognized Karpati, who also remembered him and the night in Debrecen five years earlier. Karpati asked, "How do the Germans treat us here?" The reply was, "As long as you do your work, there's no problem. But if you slow down too much, they give you a shove with their gun butts." Karpati snorted, "Let them just try to shove me. The man who touches me is in death's hands."

Remembering Karpati's bravado in Debrecen, my father became alarmed. "Don't be a smart guy here!" he warned. "They have guns and bayonets. They won't hesitate to use them

on all of us. Your bare hands won't do you any good: they don't fight by Olympic rules here." Several others chimed in, begging Karpati not even to think of retaliating, but he just repeated, "I can't help it. I won't be able to hold myself back. The man who touches me dies."

Using shovels, rakes and pickaxes, the work detail was widening a narrow dirt road for tanks and cars. They were at a small bridge spanning a shallow stream when a German guard, walking along the line of working men, casually nudged Karpati with his gun stock.

*"Schnell! Schnell!"*

Karpati whirled around, twisted the rifle out of the soldier's hands, broke it over his knee, grabbed the astonished man and threw him over the bridge into the stream below. My father and the other 100 Jews in the work detail immediately began saying *Shema*, certain that death was at hand. "We were crying. We knew our lives were over."

Miraculously, nothing happened. Perhaps, despite Nazi propaganda about the physical inferiority of Jews, the officer in charge at the scene was impressed with Karpati's skill and

strength; possibly he was awed at having an Olympic champion in his unit. In any case, he decided to summon his commanding officer. That man, paradoxically, chose to order the arrest of the hapless soldier who'd been tossed into the stream by Karpati – for allowing a Jew to do that to him.

To maintain discipline though, Karpati was immediately transferred elsewhere. My father never saw him again, but heard that he pulled a similar stunt a few weeks later and was beaten so badly that his broken ribs punctured his lungs. Rumor had it that the beating had been arranged by friends of the German wrestler Karpati had defeated in the Berlin Olympics.

Karpati did survive the war, returned to Budapest and changed his name back to Klein. He went on to a successful career, coaching Hungary's Olympic wrestlers.

Almost 60 years have passed since the Holocaust, and nearly 30 since the events at the Munich Olympics. The past continues to haunt and wound us. My father, now 90, continues to wrestle with the sorrows of his past. But there is an occasional smile, bitter yet resolute, when he remembers the deeds of the great Karpati. **JA**

*the last word  
in  
his in  
visibility  
the talmudist memorizes  
words  
that carry  
beyond the hissing  
of Zyklon B*

*Poem by Aaron E. Bulman*