



# WAR ATHLETES

*Christopher Warner* on sporting figures in conflict.



## LILLI HENOCH

**T**he Bavarian Quarter in Berlin is a diverse, vibrant district known for its wide boulevards, eclectic cafes, and bustling nightlife. Prior to the Second World War, the area was also home to a large Jewish community with several well-known residents, including Albert Einstein.

Today, visitors walking in the same footsteps as the legendary physicist will find a small brass-plated stone known as a Stolperstein ('stumbling block'). The tribute marks the former address of one of Einstein's neighbours, Lilli Henoch, the most successful female athlete of the Weimer Republic. As one of the 60,000 stones placed across 21 countries

in Europe, the engraved memorial serves as a poignant reminder of Nazi persecution.

Originally from Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), Henoch grew up in a middle-class Jewish family. She displayed a natural all-around talent in several sports, making her future accomplishments even more impressive, considering the few opportunities available for female athletes at the time.

Following the death of her father in 1912, she and her siblings (older sister Suse and younger brother Max) moved to Berlin, where her mother subsequently remarried. They settled on Haberland Strasse (today

**FACTFILE**

**Born:** 28 October 1899  
**Died:** c. 8 September 1942 (aged 42)  
**Sport:** Athletics, Field Hockey, Team Handball  
**Accomplishments:** Five-time world record holder. 10 German Championship titles.

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Treuchtlinger Strasse 5), where their famous neighbour would occasionally drop by to listen to Suse play the piano.

Lilli joined the Berlin Sports Club (BSC) in 1919 and wasted no time making an impact. She helped pioneer their women’s athletics program and became the first female to receive the ‘Golden Eagle’ — the highest honour awarded by the prestigious club.

Between 1922 and 1926, the superstar set five world records in athletics and won ten German championship titles, competing in the shot-put, discus, long jump, and the BSC’s 4x100-meter relay. The sprint squad went unbeaten in the German Championships for three consecutive years and included a world record of 50.4 seconds in 1926 with Henoch running the lead-off leg.

### STRENGTH AND POWER

Although she possessed the slender physique of a sprinter, her individual world records were established in the discus and shot put. Henoch set her second kugelstossen world record while competing at the 1925 German Championships in Leipzig, throwing the steel sphere 11.57 meters.

Her unique blend of strength and power would have made her an ideal candidate for multi-events such as pentathlon, a discipline that would not debut for women until 1964.

As punishment for the First World War, the International Olympic Committee had banned Germany from participating in the Olympiads of 1920 and 1924. The Games also excluded the sport of athletics for women before finally adding a handful of events to the program in 1928.

By then, the Germans were allowed to send a team, but an ill-timed injury derailed Henoch from competing. Nonetheless, she spent most of the decade cementing her legacy as both a trailblazing athlete and a coach for young athletes while earning a degree in physical education and orthopedics from the Prussian College for Physical Exercise.

The popular sportswoman also dominated in other arenas as one of the premier field hockey and team handball players in the country. Henoch achieved another milestone in January 1933 when the BSC elected her chairperson of the women’s athletics division.

The position allowed her to improve girls’ programs, enabling the

development of many top prospects who later thrived on a world stage. Her well-earned promotion, however, did not last long. Shortly after the Nazis' rise to power, club officials dismissed her with no explanation.

Despite receiving several offers to coach and train abroad, Germany's most celebrated female athlete chose to remain in Berlin. She worked as a physical education teacher at the Jewish primary school in the suburb of Prenzlauer Berg and competed for the Jüdischen Turn-und Sportclub '1905' (JTSC). Meanwhile, living conditions rapidly deteriorated for anyone out of step with the new ruling party.

As expected, Henoch would be excluded altogether from the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin — a platform Hitler used to blatantly propagandize his message of racial bigotry and anti-Semitism to the world.

Jesse Owens aside, the spectacle went according to plan: 'pure' German athletes tallied the most medals while deliberately omitting Jewish athletes and coaches from its teams.

As the Nazi war machine kicked into high gear, Jews were forcibly removed from their homes, and all non-Aryan schools became shuttered. Henoch soon found herself labouring as a harvest worker in Neuendorf, about 60km east of Berlin. On 5 September 1942, she and her mother, Rose, were put in a livestock railcar and deported to the East.

## FROM BERLIN TO RIGA

The nation of Latvia had enjoyed over two decades of freedom after gaining independence from Russia in

1918. But that all changed in August 1940 when Soviet tanks rolled across the border and annexed the country once again. A year later, German forces invaded, making Riga the capital of the Reichskommissariat Ostland, a civilian administration in charge of Baltic territories.

Having endured a year under the brutal Red Army, many Latvians celebrated their new conquerors' arrival. Soon, however, they realised Germany had no intention of restoring their sovereignty. Almost immediately, the Nazis began its reign of terror in Riga by burning the city's main Jewish synagogue to the ground with hundreds of people trapped inside.

Additionally, the new regime encouraged the local population to participate in a well-organised pogrom.

Authorities quickly issued new decrees, mandating that all Jews had to be registered and barred from public places, including parks, swimming pools, and even sidewalks. Most Jews had their property and money confiscated and could be randomly assaulted or raped with impunity by any non-Jew.

Further regulations required wearing a yellow six-pointed star on their clothing with the slightest violation typically carrying a penalty of death.

Roughly 29,000 persecuted citizens (mostly women and children) were rounded up and interned inside a congested ghetto in a section of Riga known as the Moscow Quarter. By November 1941, the situation grew increasingly desperate as food



**ABOVE** Henoch's Stolperstein outside her one-time home in the suburbs of Berlin. In 1942, Henoch and her mother Rose were deported from Germany to Latvia and were killed there.

and water shortages combined with overcrowding and poor sanitation to create a breeding ground for disease.

To make room for new arrivals from Germany, Nazi officials forced most of the ghetto inhabitants to march over 20km in freezing weather to a forested area near the village of Rumbula. They were stripped of their clothing and forced to lie down in pre-dug trenches before being

slaughtered by Einsatzgruppen death squads.

The mass executions employed a technique known as the 'Jekeln system' (named for the SS leader of Latvia, Richard Jekeln). Columns of the dead prisoners were systematically stacked on top of each other. To save ammunition, the soldiers shot each person once in the back of the head.

The sheer volume of bodies resulted in some victims initially surviving only to be buried alive or crushed by the weight of the corpses above them.

For Henoch and her mother, the journey from Berlin to Riga lasted three days. Records show them listed as 'missing' on 8 September 1942. They were most likely murdered and buried in the same mass graves outside of Rumbula.

As for the other family members, Max would be deported to Auschwitz on 19 April 1943 and later died in the Buchenwald concentration camp. Suse, however, managed to survive the Nazi onslaught, having escaped to Romania.

Aside from the Stolperstein, the memory of Lilli Henoch has been honoured with various landmarks around Berlin, including a school gymnastics hall in Schöneberg, a football field in Kreuzberg, and a street in Prenzlauer Berg. In 2002, a memorial ensemble was unveiled in Rumbula, Latvia, representing one of the largest Holocaust sites in Europe. •



**LEFT** Henoch (fifth from right) with her Berlin Sports Club (BSC) teammates following their victory in a match against SC Brandenburg, November 1924. The athlete's individual world records were established in discus and shot put.