

June 19 2013
Hilton Houston Post Oak
Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award
Karen Propp

I'm thrilled to be here among such energy for books and book making, book buying, book reading--all things books. Many thanks to AJL for being who you are and especially to Aileen Grossberg and the rest of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Committee for selecting me this year. I'm so honored by your confidence and encouragement in my book, the story I have to tell about Judith Deutsch and the teenage girls swim team that triumphed in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s.

The swim team was part of the Hakoah sports club, once one of the largest in Europe at 3000 members. Founded in 1909 in response to the Aryan clause that prohibited Jews from joining sports clubs, Hakoah had a Zionist vision that followed Max Nordau's appeal for "muscular Judaism." They wanted to prove to themselves and to the rest of the world that Jews could be strong, successful athletes as well as stereotypically pale scholars and shopkeepers.

Hakoah swimmer Judith Deutsch, the protagonist of my book, championed a small, spirited group of girl swimmers who swam through so much history--the annual five kilometer "All Vienna," an open water race down the Danube river, which drew hundreds of thousands of spectators; the second Maccabiah games held in 1935 in Eretz Israel--while the drumbeat of Nazism sounded in nearby Germany.

In 1936, Judith was 17 years old when she and two teammates--Ruth Langer and Lucie Goldner--were invited to represent Austria at the Berlin Olympics. Although this was the highest opportunity of any athlete's career, after much soul searching, Judith and then Ruth and Lucie sent in their resignation. They were among the few to boycott the Berlin Olympics in protest of Hitler's treatment of the Jews in Germany. It was not an obvious or popular decision at the time.

So that's the outline, the sketch of the story. I want to end by telling you how the Sydney Taylor manuscript award has already begun to work its magic.

Shortly after I posted notice of having won the award on Facebook, Judith Deutsch's immediate family contacted me. She had emigrated to Palestine in 1938, where she married a Hakoah hockey player and with him raised three children. She died in 2006. But now in my Inbox I received an email from her son, Benni Haspel. He said he was keen to cooperate in the book. And he just happens to be a professional archivist. Through him, I've discovered a trove of new material, including a digital copy of the original letter that Judith wrote to announce that she was "boycotting not Olympia, but Berlin."

So it's all very exciting. Many, many thanks for your support--it's put the wind in my sail to complete the book.