

A film review of the swimming documentary, "Watermarks," appears in the March issue of Swimming World Magazine. The magazine article also includes photos of Coach Zigo Wertheimer as well as the Hakoah swimmers from 1935: Elisheva Schmidt, Lucy Goldner, Lisl Schmidt, Mrs Schmidt, Judith Deutsch, Hanni Deutsch, Hedy Bienenfeld, Ruth Langer, Ann Marie Pick and Erica Kreminetzky.

"Watermarks" was nominated for an Israeli Oscar, played in numerous film festivals, and opened in theaters across the United States last January. The film will be released on DVD this fall.

Following is a more detailed version of the review, written by Gil Lahav, a free-lance journalist based in New York City.

### **A Film of Inspiration and Passion**

The documentary film, *Watermarks*, profiles a group of Jewish Austrian female swimmers from the 1930s who inspiringly confront adversity and, through their various struggles and journeys, embody the spirit of passionate and courageous living.

By Gil Lahav

*Watermarks*, a documentary about a Jewish Austrian swimming team from the 1930s, features a group of women who seem unstoppable in their constant quest to be the best, to survive and to live happy, vibrant lives from their youth through their older years.

They defy the Austrian anti-Semitism of the 1930s and break national and international swimming records. They escape the Holocaust and restart their lives from scratch in foreign lands, where they continue to swim, find love, raise families and develop distinguished careers.

Their lives and history itself come full circle when the documentary returns these women (now in their 80s) to the very Austrian swimming pool where they competed as youngsters over 60 years ago and where they take one last swim together in that same pool, wearing their re-created outfits of yesteryear.

Banned from Austrian sporting clubs for the early part of the 20th century, Jews formed their own athletic association called, Hakoah, which means the Strength in Hebrew. True to the name of their club, the women profiled in *Watermarks* seem almost superhuman in all that they have done and seen.

Nevertheless, first-time filmmaker Yaron Zilberman masterfully reveals their charming humanness throughout the historical narrative from their secret crushes to their good-spirited rivalry and to swimmer Ann Marie's amusing insistence that she not be photographed in her bathing suit as an 83-year-old unless she's actually in the pool when

the picture is taken.

### **An Uneasy Mix of Fortunes and Foreboding**

The Austrian history through which the Watermarks women lived offered an uneasy mix of fortunes and foreboding for the Jews, who have lived in Vienna for over 800 years.

While Austrian Jews were banned from government army posts, they excelled as professionals, intellectuals and artists. Austrian Jews such as Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Martin Buber, Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schnitzler and Stefan Zweig were seen as leaders who reached unprecedented achievements in their respective fields. Three out of four Austrian Nobel Prize winners in medicine were Jewish, as were half of Austria's physicians and 60 percent of its lawyers. Political Zionism, founded by Theodore Herzl, also took root in Vienna.

Jewish success generated a backlash of anti-Semitism. In 1897, Vienna elected an anti-Semitic mayor, Karl Lueger, who blamed the Jews for the city's financial problems and incited anti-Semitic sentiment, while privately maintaining ties to some wealthy Jewish friends. Adolph Hitler, at the time a young man in Vienna, later claimed to be influenced by Lueger.

In March of 1938, Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany. State-supported violence against Jews erupted, culminating in Kristallnacht (Nov. 9-10, 1938). Jewish shops, institutions and synagogues were mobbed and pillaged, and about 6,000 Jews were sent to their death in the gas chambers of Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen.

The racist Nurnberg laws were enforced, denying Jews their civil liberties and forcing them to wear a yellow star. All Jewish organizations and institutions including Hakoah were shut down. Austria's Jewish community of about 180,000 was decimated by the Holocaust. Approximately 60,000 Austrian Jews were murdered, 2,000 survived the concentration camps, 800 survived in hiding and the rest fled to other countries.

### **A True Revelation**

When asked what inspired his documentary about a Jewish Austrian swimming team, director Yaron Zilberman replies that he had always perceived pre-Holocaust European Jewry as an intellectually gifted, but physically frail people.

He elaborates enthusiastically: The story of Hakoah Vienna's athletic triumphs was a true revelation....Backed by a proud and vibrant Jewish community, Hakoah was the complete antithesis of my former misconception they confronted hatred (by) sporting the Star of David on their chests and (disproving) a false stigma with uncompromising physical excellence.

During its existence from 1909 through the 1930s, the Hakoah club embodied the complexity of the Jewish experience in Austria. In its early years, Hakoah considered itself both a Zionist and a patriotic Austrian club. Many Hakoah members volunteered for and died in the first World War. To maintain morale and solidarity, Hakoah members in Vienna regularly sent out newsletters and parcels to fellow members fighting on the WWI front.

After the Great War, Hakoah sprang to prominence when its soccer team became the first foreign club to defeat an English team on English soil. The Hakoah team went on to win numerous national and international championships, but growing anti-Semitism in Vienna and the lure of American money led most of the senior players to accept offers from American teams.

### **Swimming Team Dominates**

As the soccer team began to dissipate, Hakoah's emphasis shifted toward other sports, particularly swimming. Hakoah's swimming team went on to dominate Austrian water sports from 1922 until the 1938 Anschluss, thanks to Hakoah's liberal approach to female athletics and its stellar coach, Zsigo Wertheimer. After soccer, swimming was Austria's most popular sport, with top swimmers often elevated to superstar status.

The Hakoah women's team earned victories in pools and rivers across Austria, and a new generation of champions entered the spotlight and rivaled Europe's top swimmers. In 1924, with Alfred Guth first among the men and 15-year-old Hedy Bienenfeld first among the women, Hakoah recorded a stunning double victory in the Quer Dÿrch Wien a grueling 7 km course. This victory launched Hakoah's enduring winning streak in one of Austria's most popular sporting events.

Despite their efforts, the Jewish athletes were increasingly despised. By the mid-1930s, many competitions deteriorated into violent anti-Semitic demonstrations by the pro-Nazi EWASK sporting club.

But Hakoah's excellence in the pool could not be deterred. By the fall of 1935, Judith Deutsch held every Austrian middle and long distance freestyle record. In early 1936, she became the first Hakoah member to win the Golden Badge of Honor, a prestigious recognition annually bestowed upon Austria's top three athletes.

In one of the many memorable moments in *Watermarks*, Judith's sister, Hanni, who also swam for Hakoah, remarks proudly that Judith was the first person to stand up to Hitler. Hanni recounts how her sister refused to participate in the 1936 Berlin Olympics: Judith would say, 'Why should I go to Hitler, when the pools in Germany have signs that read, Dogs and Jews forbidden?'

Shortly after Judith took her principled stand, the Austrian swimming federation permanently banned her from all competitions and expunged her records from the official books.

Six decades later in 1995 the president of the Austrian swimming federation learned of the injustice and invited Judith to Vienna for a ceremony to reinstate her records and medals. Judith refused to travel to Vienna, stating that it had taken the federation too long to recognize its wrongdoing. So the Austrian officials agreed to fly to Israel and hold the ceremony there.

### **Leaving Their Mark**

This is but one of the many story gems told in the documentary. Indeed, each of the Watermarks women leaves her mark on the film in her own way.

\* Elisheva, the backstroke swimmer, fell in love with Palestine while participating in the 2nd Maccabiah Games ( The Jewish Olympics ) in 1935. She recalls how, upon her return to Vienna, her parents mocked her Zionist emigration plans and how, ironically, their very lives were saved when Elisheva arranged a place for them on Hakoah's illegal transport to Palestine in 1938. She became a renowned child psychotherapist in Israel and Europe, and still runs an active practice.

\* Hanni, the Hakoah backstroker who has lived next door to her sister, Judith, since the 1940s, notes that nothing can prevent their daily 6 p.m. ritual of poetry reading over a glass of Vermouth. The film captures the 85-year-old Judith impressively reciting from memory a funny German poem about heartbreak as Hanni follows along in her book of poems. Judith passed away last November.

\* Greta, the Hakoah diver who today lives in New Jersey, leaves her mark on the film when she returns to Vienna for the Hakoah reunion and engages her taxi driver in a discussion about Austria's Holocaust past. As she probes his views on the subject, it becomes awkwardly clear that even today Jews are not accepted as true Austrians.

\* Anni, the Hakoah breaststroke champion who later went blind due to uveitis, still swims at her Los Angeles home by removing the pool cover from only the lane in which she plans to swim. She explains that doing so enables her to swim in a straight line. After escaping the Holocaust and starting her life anew in the U.S., Anni went back to school and became a psychotherapist. Today, at 87, she still runs a group for the visually impaired and another entitled, Getting Old Is Not for Sissies. She also regained her Austrian citizenship, she explains, so that she could use her vote to prevent another Hitler from rising to power.

## **Continuity Between Present and Past**

Narrated in English by the Israeli, MIT-educated director, the film has interviews in English, Hebrew and German (with English subtitles). Zilberman skillfully animates his subject by punctuating the interviews with news clippings, old photos, memorabilia and archival footage all of which create a touching continuity between present and past. Even the decades-old black-and-white photos of swimming events become contemporary and lively as they are displayed with the sounds of pool competitions playing in the background.

The singular soundtrack of *Watermarks*, replete with music from the era and places explored by the documentary, makes the film all the more powerful, vivacious and unforgettable. Zilberman's careful deliberations in selecting the music reveal its many meanings in the film.

The director chose Lionel Hampton's music because the *Watermarks* women claimed to dance to 1930s jazz during their youth in Vienna and because Hampton's vibraphone works sound like water.

The song, *See, Little Erica, this is America* accompanies the film's chapter on the better life in America that awaited the Hakoah swimmers who emigrated there and was written by a celebrated Jewish cabaret musician and Holocaust survivor who also made it to America (Hermann Leopoldi).

Most significantly, the music that plays during the climax of the film, when the Hakoah swimmers return as octogenarians to the same pool they swam in over 60 years ago, is "Dein Ist Mein Ganzes Herz" a stirring love song co-written by Fritz (Beda) Lšhner.

A founding member and financier of Hakoah, Beda was also a famous lyricist of Franz Lehar's operettas and a pillar of the Viennese musical world. Thus, the song symbolically serves as a musical tribute to the very women seen on the screen, of whom Beda himself would have been so proud.

Beda was ultimately sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp, where he composed the chilling *Buchenwald March* with Hermann Leopoldi (who was also interned there), before being sent to his death at Auschwitz.

Viewers hear the chilling *Buchenwald March* when the *Watermarks* women attend a Viennese cabaret before their nostalgic reunion in the Amelianbad pool of their past. Their mixed reactions to the song underscore the bittersweet nature of their return to Vienna.