

THE OLYMPICS AND THE JEWS

The world's tolerance for nonsense is being tested to the limit by the current discussion about the Olympics.

It should be noted that in December of 1935 the American Athletic Union came within two and a half votes of boycotting the upcoming Olympics in Nazi Germany. The proposed boycott of that Olympics was supported by the American Federation of Labor, the Methodist Church, Al Smith and a number of other public officials -- and the Jewish community. There was a mass meeting to support the boycott in Madison Square Garden.

Avery Brundage, the American Olympics high muck-a-muck took the pious position that the Olympics be kept "above politics," for the sake of world peace. But soon after the Olympics in Berlin, Hitler accelerated his aggressive policies, and launched World War II. The world's attendance at the Berlin Olympics only legitimated the Nazi regime, and quickened Hitler's aggressive confidence that the world would cave in to him.

The question of holding the Olympics in Nazi Germany was a political question. The decision had an inevitable political impact. There was no way to keep it "above politics." Nor, in 1980, after the Soviet Union's most imperialistic adventure, was there any way to keep the question of America's appearance at the Moscow Olympics "above politics."

It is grimly amusing to see that the Soviet Union did not base its boycott of Los Angeles on outrage at American actions in Lebanon or Central America. Those misadventures could not stand up to the Soviet Union's activities in Afghanistan or Poland -- or Central America, for that matter -- and the Soviet leaders were obviously reluctant to open that can of worms. Rather, they based their boycott on "security," an incredibly lame excuse.

Would Soviet athletes be mugged in the streets by the hordes of American gangsters invoked by the USSR? Not very likely. Would they be kidnapped? Impossible. Would a few defect? Possibly, but Soviet athletes have defected before without any help from American sympathizers.

It is true that the organized Jewish community would have taken the occasion, within the limits of the law and the uses of free speech, to publicly point out the plight of Soviet Jewry, while welcoming the Soviet athletes themselves. That is one of the hazards the Soviet Union must accept for oppressing Soviet Jews. And we would not have desisted from such activity because the Olympics are "above politics." Are the Olympic games really "above human rights?"

When the chief rabbi of Moscow was in San Francisco last week, he was asked whether he acted as a chaplain to some of the Jewish prisoners. He explained carefully that, since prisoners were usually allowed only one visitor a year, they preferred a family visitor. That laid out the whole bleak picture.

When a movement started last year to make San Francisco a "sister city" of Leningrad, its proponents similarly said that proposal should be "above politics." But the JCRC told the city officials that officially embracing Leningrad would be an intolerable abandonment of human rights standards, while thousands of Leningrad Jews were being assailed and unable to leave.

So, perhaps the USSR is retaliating. So be it. Maybe the venue of the Olympics should be changed permanently to Greece or Switzerland. But let's reduce the level of public nonsense. More is at stake than the Olympics -- peace and human rights, for example, which are not served by appeasement or the lowering of human standards.