

Béla Guttmann



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Béla Guttmann was a successful Jewish football player who represented Hungary at the Olympics in 1924. He survived the Holocaust by hiding and managed to escape a forced labour camp. After the war he became a famous football coach and manager, leading the Portuguese club Benfica to two successive European Cup wins.



'His temperament dominated the team more than any other... he was fighting to the end with clenched teeth.'

(Hakoah sports club magazine)

Béla Guttmann was born in 1899 in Budapest, Hungary. The city, where his parents worked as dance teachers, was home to a large Jewish population, including Béla's family.

His first significant signing as a football player was for a team called MTK Budapest. He helped them win back-to-back Hungarian League titles in 1920 and 1921, before representing his country four times. However, due to rising antisemitism in Hungary, Béla moved to Austria to play for Hakoah Wien, a Jewish Zionist football club.

Béla's time at Hakoah Wien marked the pinnacle of his playing career. They won the Austrian League Championship in 1925, making him a celebrity. He enjoyed playing for a Jewish team, but they were often the target of antisemitism, which was growing across Europe.

After playing for Hungary in the 1924 Paris Olympics, Béla returned to Vienna as a Jewish sporting icon. International tours took the team to Poland, Egypt and the USA. In America they were welcomed by the growing Jewish community and Béla was signed for the New York Giants – an American football team. He soon left to join New York Hakoah – an American Jewish football team.

Off the pitch, Béla ran businesses and set up a dance school. He invested in prohibition-era speakeasies, but when his business interests collapsed after the Wall Street Crash, he was left with no other income except his football salary. In 1933, Béla returned to Vienna to play, then coach, his former team Hakoah Wien. In 1935 he took up a prestigious coaching post in the Netherlands and enjoyed success in his first season, but, as he often did throughout his career, he fell out with his employers and left after the second season. He travelled to America again, securing a permanent residence visa, but perhaps feeling that football wasn't taken seriously enough, he returned to Nazi-occupied Vienna on 6 August 1938 and travelled to Budapest. He coached Újpest FC, a Hungarian team and they won the Mitropa Cup in 1939, but Hungarian politics had become hostile towards Jews, and Béla left the club within days of victory.

Lipót Aschner, the president of his former club, employed Béla as a secret advisor to Újpest FC, which let him travel freely around the country to watch football. However, in 1944 the Nazis invaded Hungary, and Budapest was no longer a safe place for Jewish people.

Although this was towards the end of the Holocaust, the Nazi persecution of Hungarian Jews was particularly rapid and brutal, with around 12,000 Hungarian Jews arriving at Auschwitz on a typical day.

Initially, the Jewish population of Budapest were forced to live in a ghetto around the stadium where Béla's team had earlier won the Mitropa Cup. Conditions in the ghetto were poor, and there inhabitants lived in fear. The Arrow Cross, the fascist party leading the Hungarian Government, would regularly take Jews out of the ghetto, shoot them and throw their bodies into the Danube river. It is estimated that some 20,000 Jews were murdered in this way in just two months, between December 1944 and January 1945.

Béla began a relationship with a non-Jewish woman called Mariann Modován. Her brother, Pál Moldován, hid Béla in his attic. Pál was arrested, questioned and beaten but did not give Béla up. Despite this, Béla, who hated being confined, frequently left his hiding place.

Perhaps preferring the security of some sort of employment, Béla voluntarily reported for work at a forced labour camp. Compared to the deportations to Auschwitz that had begun in Budapest, the forced labour camp offered some safety, albeit in brutal conditions. However, when the threat of deportation seemed to increase, he and four others managed to escape through a window. He never spoke in detail about this, but recognised the help he had received from others in risking their own freedom for his.

Béla survived the final months of the war in Budapest, hiding in a local factory. He was 46 when the war ended. The Jewish population of Budapest had been almost completely destroyed. Despite having lived with the constant threat of death, in terrible conditions, and having lost many family members, Béla rarely spoke about his experiences during the Holocaust as he resumed his career in football, becoming one of the most successful managers in Europe.

He and Mariann married in November 1945 and his career was filled with travel, working in Romania, Italy, the Netherlands, South America, and Portugal. He continued to speak his mind, leading to repeated arguments with his employers. Perhaps that is why Béla said he could never stay at a club for more than two seasons.

In Portugal he had the greatest success of his coaching career, leading Benfica to two league and two European Cup wins. After yet another disagreement with his employers he left, saying: 'Not in a hundred years from now will Benfica ever be European champion' again. Benfica fans call this the 'curse of Béla Guttmann' as the club lost all eight of their European finals after he left.

Béla Guttmann was a great player and manager. He survived the Holocaust, but until recently his experiences were not widely known. He lived to the age of 82. On what would have been his 110th birthday, a statue of Béla holding his two European Cups was unveiled outside Benfica's stadium. Béla Guttmann's legacy is his contribution to sport, notably as a football coach.

Find out more... The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust