Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes

by

John Rosengren
Baseball during the Great Depression of the 1930s galvanized communities and provided a struggling country with heroes. Jewish player Hank Greenberg gave the people of Detroit—and America—a reason to be proud. But America was facing more than economic hardship. Hitler’s agenda heightened the persecution of Jews abroad while anti-Semitism intensified political and social tensions in the U.S. The six-foot-four-inch Greenberg, the nation’s most prominent Jew, became not only an iconic ball player, but also an important and sometimes controversial symbol of Jewish identity and the American immigrant experience. Throughout his twelve-year baseball career and four years of military service, he heard cheers wherever he went along with anti-Semitic taunts. The abuse drove him to legendary feats that put him in the company of the greatest sluggers of the day, including Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, and Lou Gehrig. Hank’s iconic status made his personal dilemmas with religion versus team and ambition versus duty national debates. Hank Greenberg is an intimate account of his life—a story of integrity and triumph over adversity and a portrait of one of the greatest baseball players and most important Jews of the twentieth century. INCLUDES PHOTOS
What people say about this book

Ebook Tops Reader, “Excellent Biography. John Rosengren has written an excellent biography of one of baseball's nearly forgotten hero's of the early 20th century. Rosengren did some great research on the facts of Greenberg's life and baseball career. As he states in the end it was difficult to find accurate quotes and stories about Greenberg from that time. Many sportswriters would just make up quotes with any or little fact behind it. He also brings out all facets of Greenberg's personality, the good and bad. He didn't sugar coat any of Greenberg's personality flaws. He also brought to light how tough Greenberg had it as one of the few Jews who played baseball during this time of the rise of Facism. On the field Greenberg faced as much trouble as Jackie Robinson did although not to the degree off of it as Robinson did. This book really does seem to give you a very good idea of how Greenberg was overall as a human being. In the end you do feel like you actually knew him.”

clemente_in_right, “Outstanding, in-depth look at Greenberg. A tremendous effort by Rosengren. Everything you'd want in a definitive bio is here - a full index, a full bibliography and a complete record of the subject. An excellent book. As some other reviewers have noted, the prose isn't the equivalent of Kahn's or Angell's. But, the writing is fine and well paced. Some highlights for me: 1. I enjoyed the way Rosengren framed Greenberg's career, achievements and his place in American Jewish culture against the backdrop of global antisemitism. 2. As a Pirates fan, I was interested in Greenberg's time in Pittsburgh and how that events that led to the transaction between the Tigers and Pirates. Rosengren does a fine job of detailing Greenberg's influence on Ralph Kiner. 3. I was curious as to how Greenberg treated players once he became part of the front office and I found his relationship with Al Rosen to be especially illuminating. My only gripe is the free flowing manner of the timeline of his post-baseball career. For example, Rosengren noted that Hank and his second wife sold their place in NYC and moved to LA in 1974. A couple of pages later, the narrative of their life in LA picks up with Rosengren describing quiet evenings at home and travel, plus the occasional dinner with other ballplayers. He specifically mentions dining with Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe. While I'm sure that meal happened, I'm quite sure it didn't take place in the 1970s (Monroe was, of course, deceased) and seems very out of place in the description of Greenberg's life at that time.”

MinnesotaMind, “Compelling Read, Simplistic Analysis. This was an engaging read and an excellent introduction to Hank Greenberg's achievements and cultural significance. Greenberg played in the era just slightly before baseball's aptly dubbed "Golden Age," and so I brought less background knowledge to Greenberg's story than to, say, Mickey Mantle's. But Greenberg's on the field heroics are impressive, most notably, his 184 RBI in 1937. Though his lifetime numbers fall well below other Hall of Fame sluggers, Hank's hitting legacy must be understood alongside his four years of military service, more years than almost any of his baseball peers and years
which were smack in the middle of Greenberg's prime. There are critical notes I'd sound regarding this book, however. First, as I just stated, Hank devoted a significant number of his prime playing years to fighting for America in WWII. The author spends quite a bit of time discussing Greenberg's feelings about the draft pre-Pearl Harbor, but treats his post Pearl voluntary enlistment rather quickly. We hear precious little about Greenberg's war years, but more troubling to me, the author doesn't bother to address any issues of regret or sadness Greenberg may have felt upon returning and only playing a few hard, short years. Rosengren spends some time discussing Greenberg's lost income and his attempts to get back in playing shape, but I would've liked to hear more about Greenberg's own impressions of where he stood in the slugging pantheon and how he felt those years he devoted to his country affected his baseball legacy for better or worse. Secondly, the subtitle Rosengren chose for this bio (Hero of Heroes) should have tipped me off as to his sympathies regarding Greenberg's assimilation. Indeed, in the epilogue, Rosengren writes that Greenberg "showed Jews how to assimilate." The book contains an engaging discussion of Greenberg's approach to his first schedule conflict with the Jewish High Holidays (Greenberg played on Rosh Hashanah, not Yom Kippur), but treats subsequent conflicts casually. It is clear in Rosengren's reporting that Greenberg's parents were not at all pleased by Hank's decision to play, but this is never explored further. Rosengren also ignores the fact that Greenberg's second wife was not Jewish and what that may have meant to his parents. Furthermore, we learn that as a father, Greenberg taught his children so little about Judaism that one child thought that Yom Kippur was a holiday on which Jews go to the planetarium (because Hank took them on one Yom Kippur, explaining that it was a special day). Obviously, where one falls within the spectrum of Jewish belief and communal identification will inform one's reaction to these details. But one thing is for sure that Rosengren seems to gloss over: these conflicts are complex and tension filled, not simple and easily decided. Rosengren will have us believe that Greenberg is the Jewish Jackie Robinson; he claims him to be the most important Jewish athlete in history. Perhaps. But consider the parallel in a way that Rosengren doesn't: Greenberg's approach to his faith in his later career and his retirement (with the exception of his staunch support for Israel) was NOTHING like Robinson's to his race. Jackie Robinson spent the rest of his too short life working tirelessly for equal rights both on and off the field. His work didn't end with himself, as he advocated for African Americans to be hired in leadership positions in baseball. Greenberg, the "hero of heroes," who taught Jews "how to assimilate," taught his children nothing of the faith of which he was supposedly a hero and ignored or indulged his pesky conscience regarding playing on holidays when it best suited him. I'm not at all arguing that Greenberg should be condemned for such behavior. Just pointing out that Rosengren seems more intent on producing an encomium than a clear eyed consideration of one of baseball's legends.

George E Georgian, “Five Stars. perfect”
sam pell, “Five Stars. great read!”