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Brooklyn College: Boxing Mecca

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As a child, the towering stacks of carefully assembled clips of paper and mounds of shredded newsprint on the floor were a fact of life for Barbara Kaplan. Her father, Hank, would wander in at odd hours, settle into his chair in the den with his pipe and giant pair of scissors, and with boxing matches and old movies flickering in the background, cut for hours into the night.

She also didn't think much of the glistening young boxer, who used to toss her playfully into the air when she followed her father into the boxing gym on Fifth Street in Miami. That's just how it was.

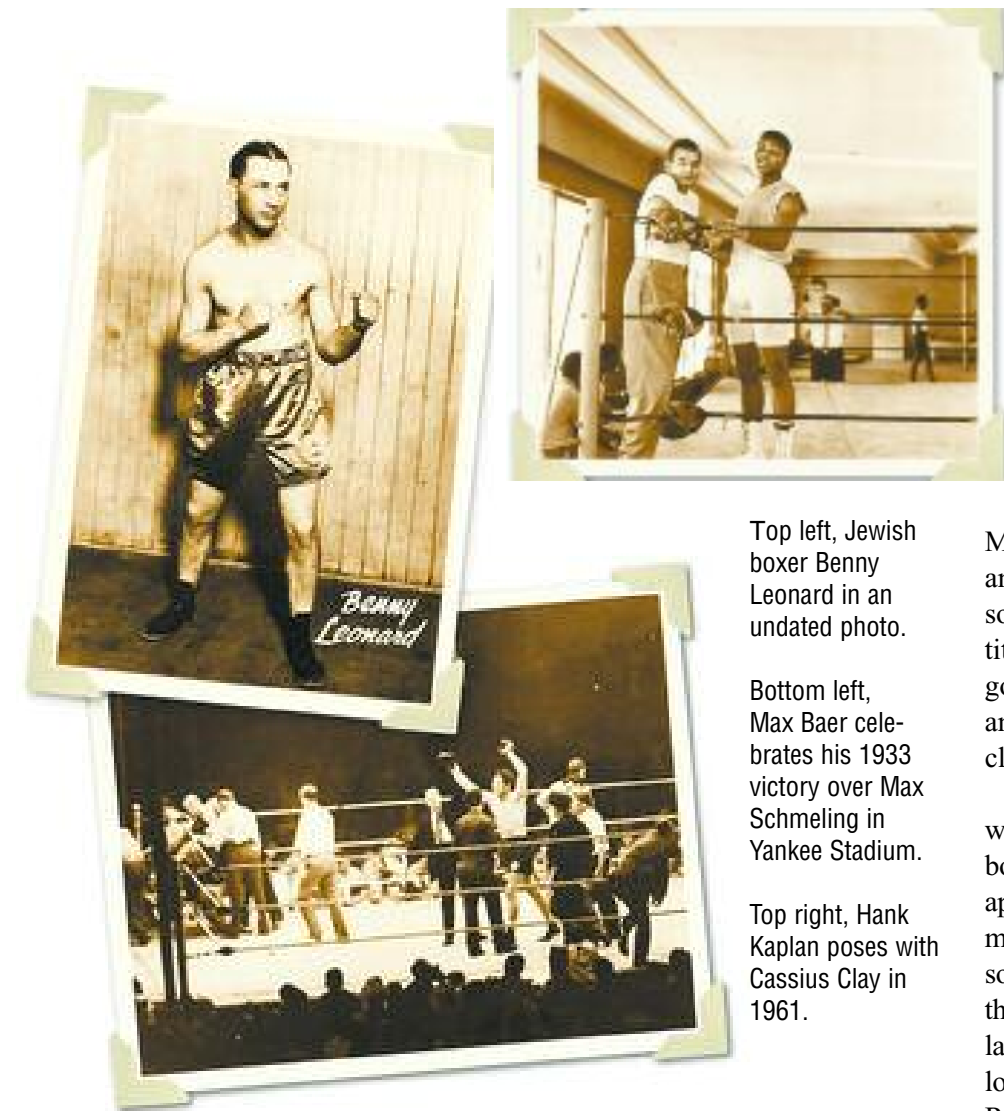
"As a child growing up, you don't really see the intrinsic value," said Hank's daughter, now Ms. Kaplan-Haar. "As I matured, I began to realize what it was he was trying to accomplish."

The boxer was Muhammad Ali, a close friend of her father's. And those mountains of news clippings grew to encompass 790 boxes covering American and British fighters between 1890 through 2007, the year of Mr. Kaplan's death. Along the way, he also amassed 2,600 books on boxing, roughly 500,000 photographic prints and negatives, 1,200 posters—many signed by some of the most prominent boxers in history—correspondence, memorabilia, scrapbooks and more materials, all chronicling the ethnicities, rivalries, lives, triumphs and deaths of thousands of fighters, famous, infamous and unknown.

The entire collection—valued at more than \$2.9 million—was willed to Brooklyn College after Mr. Kaplan's death in 2007. In recent months, its presence has attracted a stream of other donations from relatives of prominent historical boxing figures, transforming Brooklyn College into the country's premier boxing research center.

In March, the National Endowment for the Humanities recognized the national significance of the collection, awarding Brooklyn College more than \$300,000 to process the archive materials and make them available to researchers, calling it an "unprecedented" collection "that transcended the sport of boxing," according to NEH project coordinator Joel Wurl.

The committee that reviewed the materials "really had their eyes opened to the realization that this particular sport and this raw material touches on so many aspects of our culture," said Mr. Wurl. To reinforce



Top left, Jewish boxer Benny Leonard in an undated photo.

Bottom left, Max Baer celebrates his 1933 victory over Max Schmeling in Yankee Stadium.

Top right, Hank Kaplan poses with Cassius Clay in 1961.

that point, the collection earned a "We the People" designation, reserved for projects with unique value to understanding and teaching American history. "This is a project that can tell us some important things about where we come from and where we are as a society," Mr. Wurl said.

Mr. Kaplan was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 1919, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. After his father died of tuberculosis, his mother sent Mr. Kaplan and his three siblings to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which introduced the young boy to boxing. Though his professional career lasted only one bout, Mr. Kaplan's passion for the game was irrepresible.

During World War II, he disinfect-

ed ships and later went to work for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Miami. But throughout it all, he began collecting programs, newspapers, and other boxing-related materials. Upon his retirement, Mr. Kaplan devoted himself to the sport full time, working as a promoter, public relations consultant, writer and collector.

When the materials—which would go on to include Mr. Ali's training trunks, his old punching bag and amateur sketches, as well as a gold-plated cigarette case given by Max Baer to his trainer, Issy Kline—began spilling out of the family's garage, there was only one solution: the Kaplans bought a new house with a bigger garage.

Instead of cars, carpenters

trooped in to install giant wooden shelves that were bolted into the cement to protect against toppling winds and raised high above the floor to guard against flooding. But it still didn't fit. More boxes were stuffed into closets throughout the house and sprawled across the third bedroom. Papers filled up corners of the den. And still materials poured in.

Writers, journalists, and documentarians found their way to Mr. Kaplan's house for documents and stories. Only Mr. Kaplan could sort nimbly through documents and titled boxes, which included categories like "oddities" and ethnicities and religions, names, fights, weight classes, origins, fatalities. Growing up, Ms. Kaplan-Haar waited a month before showing a boyfriend the bursting garage. He approached tentatively. "I'm thinking maybe it's like in 'Psycho' there's somebody's dead mother stuffed in there," laughed Jerry Haar, who would later become her husband. With one look, he was astounded. "It was like if Rain Man had become a librarian or something."

He remembered thinking in awe: "The boxing library of America is right here in this guy's garage in Kendall, Florida."

Now it is stored above an actual library in Brooklyn College, on metal shelves that rise 10 feet high. Some of the materials have already been transferred to new acid-free storage containers, but the rest are where Mr. Kaplan originally filed them—in whatever boxes he could find, a motley collection of colored, patterned boxes originally intended for shoes, shirts, reams of paper, and sweaters.

"You're honoring all the hours and the passion so that it can live on," said Professor Anthony M. Cucchiara who is overseeing the project. "It's a real treasure hunt."