

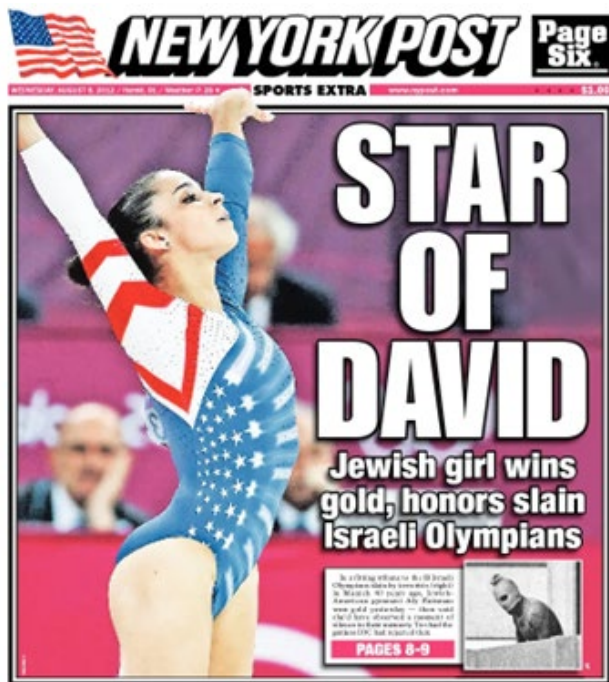
FIERCE: JEWISH OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST AND AMERICAN HERO ALY RAISMAN

Aly Raisman has won six Olympic medals, testified in front of Congress, written a best-selling memoir and used her platform as a vocal advocate for sexual abuse survivors, including writing a children’s picture book about bodily autonomy.

She is the third-most decorated American Olympic gymnast behind Shannon Miller and former teammate Simone Biles.

For many, Raisman is a paragon of poise, strength and excellence, but did you know she’s also a proud Jew?

Alexandra “Aly” Raisman was born in Needham, Massachusetts, to Rick and Lynn Raisman, a former high school gymnast. She grew up in a Romanian Jewish household, celebrating all the Jewish holidays and celebrating her bat mitzvah, a Jewish coming-of-age ritual, in 2007.



The front page of the New York Post after Aly Raisman earned a gold medal for her floor routine to the Jewish folk song, “Hava Nagila” at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, August 8, 2012.

Raisman began her gymnastics training when she was 18 months old at a mommy-and-me class. She fell in love with the sport and began competing for the U.S. National Team at age 15.

Among her many accomplishments, she is most famous for captaining both the 2012 “Fierce Five” and 2016 “Final Five” Olympic teams, both of which won gold medals in the team event.

“Ever since the 2012 Olympics, I’ve been really able to connect Jewish fans all over the world. I take a lot of pride in being able to not only represent the U.S.A, but also the Jewish community,” she told New York Jewish Week in 2016.

At the 2012 Olympics in London, the Massachusetts-native became the first American woman to win a gold medal in the floor competition for her

performance to “Hava Nagila,” a Jewish folk song that is traditionally played at celebrations such as weddings. She dedicated the routine to the 11 Israeli Olympians who were killed in the 1972 Munich Massacre.

“I’m Jewish, so I thought it would be really nice to use Hava Nagila,” Raisman explained. “And it’s a song the whole crowd can clap to, so for Olympic trials, there are about 20,000 people in the arena, and all of them clapping is an amazing feeling and it gives me a kind of extra boost of confidence and energy.”

In 2013, she was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in a ceremony that took place in Netanya, Israel, several days before the start of the Maccabiah Games, an international and Israeli multi-sport competition open to all Jews throughout the world and any Israeli citizens, regardless of their religion. It is commonly referred to as “The Jewish Olympics.” She was also inducted into the National Jewish Hall of Fame that same year.

Raisman traveled to Jerusalem to light the 2013 Maccabiah Games flame: “I was honored to be invited to be a part of the Maccabiah Games, and it was very special to be able to light the torch... [My family and I] had a great time and it’s certainly something that we’ll never forget,” she said.

The Jewish gymnast has also used her platform to advocate for justice. In November 2017, Raisman became one of at least 250 former gymnasts who came forward about the sexual abuse they experienced by former USA Gymnastics and Olympic team doctor, Larry Nassar. Raisman delivered a powerful impact statement at Nassar’s sentencing in January 2018. She discussed the trauma she experienced by Nassar and how coming forward allowed her to find her voice once again.

Aly Raisman continues to be a public figure, a vocal advocate, and a proud Jewish woman. Her story is one that celebrates what it means to be an American, representing her country on the world stage, while remaining connected and true to her Jewish heritage.

Sources

Harari, R., & Beyda, R. (2016, October 20). *Aly Raisman Talks Judaism and Gymnastics*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. <https://www.jta.org/2016/10/20/ny/aly-raisman-talks-judaism-and-gymnastics>

Karpen, E. (2023, November 13). *Get to Know Jewish Olympic Gymnast Aly Raisman*. Unpacked. <https://jewishunpacked.com/get-to-know-jewish-olympic-gymnast-aly-raisman/>

KRAKOW, POLAND, IS BUILDING A JEWISH FUTURE WITH HELP FROM NON-JEWS LIKE AGNIESZKA GIŚ

Agnieszka Giś was born into a non-Jewish Polish family. For a long time she lived in Kazimierz – the district of Krakow that was 90% Jewish in the pre-WWII period. However, since most of the Jews of Kazimierz had been murdered during the Holocaust, their culture eradicated, and the area practically abandoned after WWII, there were very few Jews living there when Agnieszka was growing up. Her knowledge and understanding of Jewishness were severely limited to the stereotypical image of Orthodox Jews, dressed in black with beards and sidelocks, and images of the Holocaust.

When she was young, a mysterious man dressed in black moved next door to her family. On Friday nights, she could hear singing from the shared balcony. Her parents explained about Jews, showed her around some of the remaining Krakow synagogues and told her of a great pre-war Jewish community. She became interested in this fascinating culture, but for a long time – especially after a school visit to Auschwitz – thought it could only be learned through books and museums.

As a teenager, Agnieszka discovered the Jewish Community Center (JCC) Krakow and fell in love with a place so different and diverse from anything she'd known before. Opened in 2008 by Prince Charles, World Jewish Relief (WJR) and the Joint Distribution Committee, it has become a worldwide institution. It seeks to build a Jewish future in a city that, for most people, is associated only with a dark past.

The existence of JCC Krakow is a reflection of something bigger that is happening all over Poland – Jewish life is being reborn and communities are developing. Due to the Holocaust and the effects of communism in Poland,



Agnieszka (right) is pictured here volunteering with another non-Jewish person, Kuba, at the JCC in Krakow, 2017.

many people hid their Jewish identity for decades. Today, more and more people are discovering their Jewish roots and learning what it means to be Jewish. This is why JCC Krakow focuses mostly on the future, showing it is safe to be a Jew in Poland. If somebody isn't sure what the discovery of their Jewish roots means for them, JCC Krakow is ready to create a space to learn.

The positive and welcoming attitude of JCC Krakow is evident: there are about 1,000 members as of 2024 and are gaining more each week. They are children, teenagers, students, parents and seniors with their own clubs and activities and a place to come together, such as during weekly Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners.

This would not be possible without the efforts of volunteers who are helping every day to build a Jewish future in Krakow. Their presence, and the fact most of them, like Giś, are non-Jewish, is incredibly special. Young people join Jewish cultural festivals as volunteers or participants and schools organize cleaning of Jewish cemeteries. The new Institute of Jewish Studies in Krakow welcomes everyone interested in deepening their knowledge of Jewish history and culture.

Nearly annihilated by Nazi Germany and their collaborators, the rich and diverse history, culture, and traditions of Polish Jewry are slowly being rediscovered and evolving into the future.

Sources

Friends of JCC Krakow. *About Us*. <https://www.friendsofjcckrakow.org/what-we-do>

Giś, A. (2014, May 12). *Opinion: On the Doorstep of Auschwitz, Krakow is Building a Jewish Future*. Friends of JCC Krakow. <https://www.friendsofjcckrakow.org/the-jewish-news-opinion-on-the-doorstep-of-auschwitz-krakow-is-building-a-jewish-future>

VOICES OF UNITY: THE JERUSALEM YOUTH CHORUS

There are a myriad of organizations inside and outside of Israel that promote dialogue, understanding, and peace among the diverse communities of Israel, including Jews, Muslims, Arab Christians, Bedouins, Druze, and everyone else who exist in between these identities. One such group is The Jerusalem Youth Chorus founded by an American Jew, Micah Hendler, in 2012. Its mission is to bring teenagers from Jerusalem, both West and East, Israelis and Palestinians, together to sing, create music, and engage in deep dialogue with one another.

There have been 175 participants so far in the program. One current member is a 17-year-old Palestinian Muslim from East Jerusalem. She joined the program to sing, but found so much more as she was able to meet Israeli teens, and as she told Jeffrey Brown of PBS: “it offered me also a space to share my voice. I feel like, as a Palestinian, you don’t have many of those places where I live.”



The Jerusalem Youth Chorus performing at an audition for the television program, America's Got Talent, July 16, 2024.

Another current member, a 15-year-old, hails from a Jewish family living in West Jerusalem. Of belonging to the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, she says, “I thought it was only singing. And then we just kind of like got separated into groups and we started talking and sharing. And it was...It’s just things I never thought I’d hear and people I never thought I’d get the chance to talk to.”

These experiences demonstrate the success of the program. It isn't necessarily a peacemaking program, but a small effort to bring youth of different backgrounds together to sing, learn from each other, and befriend one another to gain perspective and foster empathy. After the attack by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war between Israel and Hamas, this focus on dialogue has been an important foundation of the program and continues to bear fruit.

Whether they are advocating the return of the hostages still held in Gaza as of June 2024 or lamenting over family members in the West Bank who cannot move freely due to security checkpoints, the teens continue to discuss their lived realities and share their identities with each other.

As one participant so eloquently put it, "We do not share the same opinions, and it is not easy to come to this choir and kind of talk about this. It takes a lot of strength and it takes a lot of courage, but I think we all agree on the fact that the world right now is very, very ugly. And this shouldn't — this does not have to be the reality that we live in. We're not going to change how wrong the system is, but we're going to — like, we're building peace between individuals."

The Jerusalem Youth Chorus continues to bring youth together from diverse backgrounds to sing, engage with one another, and work towards the initial building blocks to peace: understanding, empathy, and community.

Sources

Brown, J., Davenport, A. A., & Everett, T. (2024, April 30). *Israeli and Palestinian Singers Bring their Hope for Peace and Justice to U.S.* PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/israeli-and-palestinian-singers-bring-their-hope-for-peace-and-justice-to-u-s>

Jerusalem Youth Chorus. *About the Jerusalem Youth Chorus.* <https://jerusalemyouthchorus.org/about>