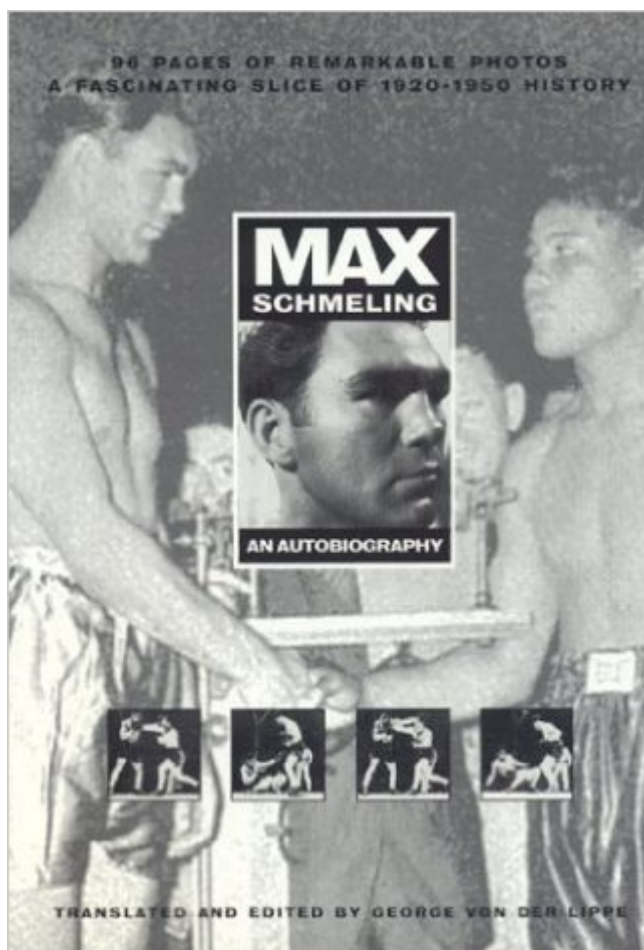


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Max Schmeling: An Autobiography



Synopsis

Max Schmeling is the only living man who has had lengthy conversations with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Pope Pius XII, Adolf Hitler, and Marlene Dietrich. World Heavyweight Champion from 1930 to 1932, Schmeling's riveting autobiography is finally made available in English translation after years as a best seller in Germany.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Anyone who thinks this is just another slick, hollow, ghost-written account of a famous sports figure's life -- athletic anecdotes and a sanitized account of a personal life -- is in for a big shock. In his autobiography, Schmeling is not telling the story of his own life so much as a cultural history of three Germanies -- the Empire he was born into, the Nazi Reich he lived through, and the Federal Republic where he recently died at the age of 99. Schmeling's account is rich with anecdotes about the "lost" Berlin of the Weimar age -- about jazz musicians, actors, poets, erotic dancers, painters, sculptors, artists, jockeys, and of course, fellow boxers. In the 1930s he also had extensive dealings with top Nazis such as Goebbels and Hitler, dealings which often got him into hot water. As he often fought in America he gave interesting and amusing accounts of the pre-WWII USA, including a garden party where he missed Al Capone by about five minutes. Though he was trotted out as the "Aryan show horse" of the Third Reich, Schmeling was indifferent to the Nazis and refused to dis-associate himself with Jews. This attitude got him drafted and, true to the extremely colorful nature of his story, he ended up a paratrooper in WWII and was decorated with the Iron Cross

(second class). Schmeling's accounts of his boxing matches vary in quality. Some he clearly doesn't remember and others, like his seminal first fight with Joe Louis, are gone into in exacting detail. It is not generally discussed today, but Schmeling destroyed the seemingly invincible Louis the first time they met, and Louis wisely waited until Max's legs were gone before he agreed to a rematch, the outcome of which we all know.

I'm not really a boxing fan, though like most people who enjoy watching and participating in sports in general, I've tried to read up on the history of boxing in order to be informed on the sport. Having said all that, I walked into reading this autobiography with the same opinion that a lot of Americans have about Max Schmeling (that is, if they even know who he is since his era was over seventy years ago) -- that Schmeling was a fanatical Nazi, Hitler's pampered, so-called "Aryan Showhorse" who represented aryan supremacy, and who, in a wonderful example of poetic justice, received a savage comeuppance at the hands of the sensational Joe Louis in their mythical 1938 rematch. Schmeling, in his wonderfully-written autobiography, exposes America's cartoonish characterization of him, and the political and racial hype surrounding both his matches with Joe Louis as precisely that -- a myth. The great thing about this book is that it is filled with class -- that is, Schmeling never outrightly goes on the attack against his critics or seems bitter at all that he (and perhaps to an even greater extent, Joe Louis) was exploited in a deeply personal way by fight promoters. Schmeling simply tells the story of his life both in and out of the ring, and it is his obvious honesty about both that do much to mitigate the idea that he is some sort of white supremacist. Schmeling's story not only outlines the history of his own career in the ring, but in doing so also describes in detail the nature of the heavyweight boxing game in the 1920s through the 1940s.

The great autobiographies I have read have been written by those in their 70's and beyond. It gives the subject a sense of perspective, it ensures that writer has seen the highs and lows of experience, and typically, modesty by that point, is gone. There might be much more to the story of Max Schmeling, but what a story he tells! Schmeling lived to be 99 years old. He competed in a time of the heavyweight division that might be called the "Silver Age". (The Golden Age belonged to the 1960's and early 1970's). Here, Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey had just hung up their gloves, Joe Louis loomed on the horizon, and Jack Sharkey, Max Baer, Primo Carnera and James Braddock circled the rings. Schmeling discusses his disappointment in winning the title via being the recipient of a low blow to Jack Sharkey, and his equal disappointment to losing the title in a return match due

to a shameful hometown decision. His recall of the first Joe Louis match is still fresh in his memory some forty years later, and the breathless account of it is spine tingling to read. Although there are few alive at this time who can remember this spectacular upset, it was every bit the upset of Buster Douglas over Mike Tyson some fifty five years later. His life took a horrific turn with the rise of Hitler in Germany in the 1930's, but Schmeling was no Nazi. He was a man of conviction, and several times went to the Nazi hierarchy to plead leniency for his Jewish friends. He eventually was punished and fell out of favor of the Nazi regime, and drafted into the army where he parachuted behind enemy lines, and had to find his way back to safety, alone.

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