

# BASEBALL DIGEST

## ★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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By Abe J. Schear  
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Aviva Kempner was born in Germany and moved to Detroit when she was three. The daughter of a Holocaust survivor, baseball was an important part of her immersion into America, an activity she shared with her family. Her memories of the Detroit Tigers are warm and poignant.

Flash forward, Aviva, now an award winning film maker, made the Emmy nominated movie "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg", the celebrated Tiger player from the 1930's - 1940's and, likely, the best of the non-pitching Jewish baseball players of the twentieth century. Hank Greenberg's story is one of sport and excellence, of overcoming discrimination and of overwhelming success. Aviva skillfully explains the story to the viewer.

Film and baseball clearly go together, each a story with a beginning and an end. There is a purpose and, often, a thoughtful analysis. I am really honored that Aviva shared a few minutes of her time and encourage you to become engaged in her projects.

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***I Remember When***, a book which includes the first 35 interviews in this series, is available for \$20. A check should be made payable to Abe Schear and mailed to him at Arnall Golden Gregory.

### Aviva Kempner "In the View of the Director"

**Schear: What are your first memories of baseball?**

Kempner: It's walking with my father and my brother into Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Very, very warm memories.

**And when was that?**

In the early 1960's. That was the best thing about Detroit. I say that I made the most positive film about Detroit, it was just about the 1930's and the 1940's.

**It has been all downhill in part since then I suppose. Now you didn't initially grow up in Detroit?**

I came to Detroit when I was 3½ I believe.

**Did you parents learn to become baseball fans?**

My dad was an immigrant Jew. He came in the 1920's and, very typically, if you were an American, you followed baseball. He was a big fan. I could see him, right now, leaning in his chair in the early days listening on the transistor radio and in the later days just watching TV. What's interesting is that when he moved to Israel, he said there were only two things he is going to miss, his kids and baseball and I was never sure what

people in Israel that get up early in the morning to watch Sports Center or something like that from the night before. There are a lot of people there that do that. **Did you father play baseball when he came to the United States?**

No. No. We're not talking any athlete here.

**Did he move to Detroit in the 1920's?**

No, after we left Berlin. I think it was 1949 or 1950.

**Did you have siblings that played baseball?**

My brother played little league. Growing up I went to a lot of little league games.

**Did you mother learn to follow baseball?**

No, it was definitely my dad.

**When you first went to your first game, do you remember where you sat?**

No, but I do remember keeping score. It was a traditional little booklet. You know if it was a hit to first you do a diamond. The old fashioned way of keeping score.

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"I think the golden age of baseball players is not remembered because it was so many years ago."

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was the order of the primary thing he is going to miss.

**That's funny. There are a lot of**

**Did you father see baseball really as an American game?**

He just totally bought into it and loved

it. It wasn't so much any other sports. Detroit, you know, was pretty popular, a pretty big sports town. We briefly lived in the suburbs so I remember there was a neighbor kid who played a lot of baseball. The first boy I kissed was a baseball player, Jeff, who sadly, sadly, sadly died in Vietnam. I have a tribute to him at the end of the Hank Greenberg film.

**I guess your father and you originally started listening to the games and then I guess he enjoyed just sitting and watching the games as well.**

Right. And we went to a lot of them too.

**Did you read the paper about baseball? Did your dad read the paper about baseball?**

Yes and we'd talk about it.

**Who the announcers were in Detroit back then?**

Ernie Harwell.

**He was remarkable, a totally sweet man.**

That is when we were listening.

**He was like many of the other announcers, a southerner who just really knew how to tell stories and he was from just outside Atlanta and went to Emory. The only announcer that I think was ever traded for a player.**

I didn't know that. That's a great line.

**When he was with the Atlanta Crackers he was traded for a player. Detroit was your favorite team. Are they still your favorite team?**

Since I live in Washington, obviously Detroit takes second priority now.

**Who were your favorite players growing up?**

Well I can remember several things. Let me go back to my father. Or are you going to ask me about Hank Greenberg and how I first heard about him?

**I will get to Hank Greenberg, I promise.**

Ricky Colavito is who I had a total crush on. It was my first adolescent crush. I remember when he went up there, strong good looking Italian guy. He would do these calisthenics types of thing, put his arm back a weird configuration and I just loved it.

**And then they traded him to the Indians or something like that.**

So that was one. I remember crying when Al Kaline broke his wrist trying to

make a catch and hitting against the wall. He was a favorite player too. I think Kaline and Colavito. I guess I was an outfield person.

**When you went to the ballpark, what were your favorite things about the park? It was quirky.**

It was just something that my brother and I bonded with my father. My parents had been divorced so it was just something we did with dad and until this day. I loved the green field. It's just like the line in the Billy Crystal movie "and seeing families together". I loved it when the Tigers won. All of us streaming into the stadium, all coming back out.

**It was a pretty big part of the community. What is the most memorable game you think you've ever gone to?**

It was a World Series and Aretha Franklin sang the national anthem. I can't remember what year that was. I meant to look it up and I didn't. Going to the game and loving the game and talking about it at night about what had happened.

**Did your dad teach you to keep score?**

Yes. That's what I was saying. He would buy those books and it would have each player and then we would do like a diamond to see how far they had

I had just finished a film and I was in LA opening it. I was getting dressed for the opening and heard that Hank Greenberg had died the night before and I knew at that moment that that had to be by next film, because growing up my brother and I heard all the time about Hank Greenberg. Especially on Yom Kippur when my dad would take us to Kol Nidre services. I remember thinking growing up that Hank was part of Kol Nidre services and in fact he was in our home. My dad had also talked about domestic anti-semitism. He said when he left the army that anti-semitism was happening in America. I knew I had to do a film about Jews fighting the Nazis and I wanted to do a film about the American counterpart. In some ways, why didn't Americans do more for its brethren?

**Hank Greenberg, who I suppose logically would have broken Babe Ruth's record if anyone had ever thrown him any pitches that he could hit in the last 2 or 3 weeks of the season.**

Right.

**It seems to me that Hank Greenberg was (and his family) always been remarkably graceful about basically not having a chance to break a great record.**

Well you know either way, I'm not sure

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**"I think it's a very intellectual game."**

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advanced. That real old fashioned way.

**Do you still have your score cards?**

No.

**I actually have a pile of my mother's score cards that she kept from the 1930's.**

You grew up in Atlanta?

**I grew up in Dayton.**

How far does your family go back?

**They came to the United States in 1903.**

Were they peddlers?

**They were grocers.**

In Dayton?

**Yes. My grandfather came and bought an apple cart. I know you directed and produced "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg". How did you get to that story and what fascinated you about that story?**

they purposely didn't pitch him a ball because he was Jewish as the papers say.

**Do you think Hank Greenberg is remembered significantly enough as a baseball player?**

I think the golden age of baseball players is not remembered because it was so many years ago. I believe that the film did a lot to really give Hank his due and I'm really proud of that. I think a lot of the great players in that period are not remembered because it's so many years ago. So I think that has a lot to do with it.

**How hard is it to do a baseball movie? Maybe that really isn't a baseball movie? How hard is it to do a documentary?**

It is hard to raise money to make it and it took three years to raise money for the

movie.

**I suppose it takes a long time to track down people to do interviews? Do you like baseball films in general?**

Oh yes. "A League of Their Own" is great. I'm actually working with Penny Marshall on a film. I loved "Money Ball". I loved the one with Kevin Costner. "42" is very good. It is my sport. I had people over last night I had the baseball game going on.

**It was 2 to 2 for a long time. Would you rather today watch a game on TV or listen to a game on the radio?**

Watch on TV.

**It always seemed to me that baseball in many ways is an oral sport. It keeps you company, that's what Ernie Harwell always said.**

Yeah, when I'm in the car I listen. On a personal note I think another aspect of baseball is that I've had crushes on players. I always have. I told you the first boy I kissed was a baseball player. So I love just seeing the players play. I have a very funny story. Who did I have crushes on? Mark McGuire, partly because I thought he behaved so very well in the big race against Roger Maris. And Palmera. So when it comes to the hearings in Congress, who is testifying and everyone is watching it? There was Palmera sitting next to McGuire.

**Do you plan to do anymore baseball movies?**

I'd love to do the history of baseball players, Latin players, they've played for 100 years. I actually got another 13 years in me to write for money. Even

though I'm not a Yankee fan, I became a big Red Sox fan about 10 years ago so I see them a lot too.

**How did you become a Red Sox Fan?**

I don't know. I just bought into the "we haven't won" psyche. I actually believed they were going to win when they came from behind.

**Do you have any favorite ballparks that you been to?**

Fenway is great. I've been to Yankee Stadium. I just think part of the Yankee thing is maybe they win too much. I feel it's very sad A Rod is getting paid so much you know and not playing. Part of the reason I redid the DVD, beside the fact it was out of print, a young boy asked me was Hank on steroids and it made me feel so bad. I realized that young kids think that's just the norm so I wanted to make a film that celebrated the players, and I never did a story on Hank in his managerial years with Bill Veeck which was quite amazing. They had Larry Doby and Satchel Paige. I also wanted to change the kids' perception of what different players did.

**Do you collect anything from baseball?**

I have a lot of Hank Greenberg memorabilia on my wall. I have pictures of Sandy Koufax pitching. I commissioned a picture of Hank Greenberg hitting and Moe Berg catching. So obviously it's the Jewish battery.

**That would be a great story. He's one of my favorite players for all the wrong reasons. He's a guy that really seemed to live a life utterly unfulfilled.**

**He made his own life up and he died almost a work of fiction. But it's a fascinating story and he was a guy that loved to be on the team but hated to play because he was sure that if he played he'd have to go back to the minor leagues because he wasn't any good. I don't have any more questions.**

I think the most important thing is it's a great game. It is a game about physical skill but it's so much a game about the mind and I think it's a very intellectual game. I can't follow football at all. I think it's violent, although interestingly enough I like hockey, because I think it's so amazing on how graceful they are on the ice.

**That's because you have the Red Wings.**

I don't know, how do you feel?

**I love baseball. I think baseball is a game that you can discuss. It's a game that is slow enough that you can remember what happened and it's a game that 30 years later you can remember where you sat and what you ate at the ballgame.**

There were times that I did eat hot dogs. You know it is just a thing you did with family. It reminds me of such a positive way about my father. Actually I'm a little upset that my brother is a total hockey and basketball fan. He's abandoned baseball and I don't have any children and he bought my niece to those games. So I feel a little deserted. What can you do!

**Thank you for your time.**

**A few notes regarding Hank Greenberg:**

We have such very short memories and the words “great” and “phenom” are used so often that they have generally lost their meanings. That is hardly the case when dealing with the extraordinary career of Hank Greenberg.

Greenberg first appeared in a Detroit uniform in 1930 at the age of 19. For a decade or more, he led a routinely average team to great glory and his amazing baseball career may only be surpassed by his nearly four years in the military (it should be noted that Greenberg had served his tour of duty when the events at Pearl Harbor occurred, a fact which caused Greenberg to re-enlist) and by his graciousness to Jackie Robinson who said of Greenberg “Class tells. It stands out all over Mr. Greenberg”.

In 1935, Greenberg had 103 RBI’s at the All Star Break! He finished the season with total 389 bases, including 36 home runs, 16 triples, 46 doubles and 87 walks. This was a year after leading the Tigers to the World Series where, like Sandy Koufax decades later, Greenberg did not play in a World Series game which fell on Yom Kippur.

In 1937, Greenberg had an amazing 183 RBI’s and 40 home runs. Epically, in 1938 Greenberg had 58 home runs despite walking nearly twenty percent of his at bats. Whether the league pitched to him or around him as the season ended will never be known and Greenberg, the gentleman that he was, never complained and never again approached Babe Ruth’s magical “60”, which was only broken in 1961 by Roger Maris.

After World War II, Greenberg ultimately finished his career in Pittsburgh where he mentored a young Ralph Kiner. Greenberg subsequently became the general manager of the Cleveland Indians.

Hank Greenberg was elected to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in 1956. His is a “great” story, athletic, patriotic and graceful – remarkably different and distinguished from athletes of today. Aviva’s movie about Hank Greenberg is both enjoyable and educational and I hope that you will find the time to watch it.

**Aviva Kempner**  
“In the View of the  
Director”

**\*\*\* 61st EDITION \*\*\***

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