

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 291

“Nuremberg Laws”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

When the Nazi government in Germany turned its attention to treatment of Jewish people in Germany, it struggled with how to define who was Jewish and how to create a new, lesser, legal status for Jewish people in Germany.

They found their inspiration in the United States.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 291. The Nuremberg Laws.

When people think about Nazis, about Adolf Hitler, and the National Socialist movement in our day, one of the first things that comes to mind is the Nazis’ horrible ideas about race and ethnicity. And rightly so. Today I want to talk about how those ideas translated into law and public policy in the early years of Nazi rule in Germany.

And when you think about Nazis and their horrible ideas about race and ethnicity, your mind likely goes first to anti-Semitism, and again, rightly so. This means I’m going to be talking mostly, though not exclusively, about Nazi policy regarding Jewish people in Germany. But always keep in mind that Nazi hatred was never directed exclusively at Jewish people. The Nazis had hate enough to spread around.

Let’s begin by winding the clock back to the spring of 1933, just weeks after Hitler became chancellor, when the government he led took its first steps toward diminishing the legal status of Jewish people in Germany. I talked about this period in episode 270. Soon after the Enabling Act

was passed, the law that gave Hitler's cabinet the power to enact laws on their own without Reichstag approval, the first steps were taken to bar Jewish Germans from public life in Germany. First was the law the government called the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service." This law banned what it called "non-Aryans" from holding positions in government, a way of banning Jewish people without acknowledging that was what was happening. And when we speak of government positions in Germany, we are also speaking of university professors and academics. Some of the greatest minds in Germany, including luminaries like Albert Einstein, suddenly found their services were no longer required.

The law also allowed for the dismissal of civil servants whose pasts made it doubtful they would support the new National Socialist state. This meant officials appointed by, or sympathetic to, the socialists. It also allowed for the removal of those who did not have proper training, a catchall term that could be used to dismiss virtually anyone the Nazis didn't like for whatever reason.

Soon after came laws making it difficult or impossible for Jewish people to practice law or become judges. Another law, innocently titled "The Law against the Overcrowding of Schools" limited the number of Jewish students that could be enrolled in a German school, ostensibly to remedy overcrowding, although Jewish people made up less than one percent of Germany's population. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels used the powers of his office to bar Jewish people from the arts, music, literature, film, theatre, and journalism.

In the summer of 1933, just six months into Hitler's time as chancellor, the government passed a denaturalization law, which permitted the German government to revoke German citizenship from any immigrant granted it during the era of the Weimar government and deemed undesirable. The principal targets of this law were the approximately 150,000 Jewish immigrants who came to Germany after the war, principally from the territories of the former Austrian and Russian Empires. These Jewish immigrants were quite different from native-born Jewish Germans, who were highly assimilated into German society. These newer immigrants were mostly poor, rustic, and not well educated. They were not so well integrated into German culture and were fairly easy to pick out.

But that itself highlighted a problem: these laws that singled out Jewish people, or "non-Aryans," did not define these terms. Who exactly was or wasn't Jewish? If Jewish people, or any other category of people, were to be singled out by law for different treatment, some kind of legal definition would have to be devised. Those new Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were one thing, but Jewish Germans were highly assimilated. Inter-marriage between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans was fairly common. How would you even identify a Jewish German?

A second problem was the criticism that German racial policies were drawing from abroad, especially from the United States, and also from Britain and its Dominions. You'll recall I mentioned that the Nazis organized a brief boycott of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany and how it drew official criticism from the governments of the US and the UK. This mattered to

Hitler because he cared about his international image. Hitler had promised the German people that he would release Germany from the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles and make Germany a strong and respected nation once more, and that he would accomplish all this through peaceful diplomacy. Hence the concern over his, and Germany's, image in other nations. He needed diplomatic credibility to succeed in the goals he had set for himself.

You'll recall too that Hitler had some trouble with the SA, the stormtroopers, especially the radicals among them who took the view that the rise of a Nazi government was not the end of the fascist revolution, but merely its beginning. By late 1933 and into 1934, Hitler was more concerned about tightening the leash on the SA. He accomplished this in the aftermath of The Night of the Long Knives, episode 285. That crackdown succeeded in clipping the wings of the SA, but it left behind disgruntled stormtroopers. In search of an outlet for their frustrations, these unhappy brownshirts began taking them out on the Jewish community in Germany through late 1934 and into 1935. Eruptions of violence against Jewish people and Jewish businesses and organizations escalated.

This second wave of anti-Semitism in Germany, in contrast to the first in 1933, was a grassroots phenomenon. It was not directed by Hitler or the upper leadership of the Party or the SA. And it drew complaints from the German public. Germans are a people noted for their preference for doing things in an organized and tidy way, and even many Germans who had no particular sympathy for their Jewish neighbors objected to random lawlessness. Local police were uncertain whether they were expected to allow anti-Semitic attacks or crack down on them. Some Germans, even Nazi Party members saw these outbursts of violence against Jewish Germans as inconsistent with National Socialist promises to build a more orderly society. Hjalmar Schacht, now once again president of the Reichsbank as well as economics minister in the Hitler government, condemned the violence and lawlessness as bad for Germany's international image and therefore bad for the German economy.

A consensus emerged among the Nazi leadership that this grassroots violence reflected a growing impatience among ordinary Germans that the government was not taking stronger measures against Jewish people. And so, committees of lawyers and experts were assembled to draft proposals for introducing formal restrictions on the rights of Jewish Germans into the German legal code.

This brought them back to the question of how to define a Jewish person legally, and what kind of legal structures might be enacted to create a society that officially designated some of its members as second-class citizens. And this brings us to a very uncomfortable part of the story, uncomfortable for me anyway, as an American: For guidance on how to construct a society with officially sanctioned and codified discrimination, they looked to the laws of the United States.

[music: Wagner, Overture from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*]

The United States went to war against Germany back in 1917, and those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that the United States will go to war against Germany once again in a few years. From these facts you might infer a Nazi hostility toward the United States, but that isn't what happened. In the racist Nazi worldview, the United States was a nation founded by Nordics, which to a Nazi meant the peoples of the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, and Germany, and this made the US one of the "good guys" in the international order.

But there were exceptions. It is true that the vast majority of European-Americans living in the US in, say, 1870, would have traced their ancestry back to a country the Nazis deemed "Nordic," but since then the US had taken in large numbers of immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe. The Nazis might give Italians a pass, especially after Germany and Italy became friendly, but Eastern Europeans meant Jewish immigrants. It also meant Slavic immigrants, and Slavic people ranked only a little above Jewish people in the Nazi estimation.

There were some aspects of the United States that Hitler and the Nazis found admirable. The US had grown from a minor power to a major power to what was arguably the strongest nation in the world, unquestionably the nation with the largest economy, as well as a center of technological and cultural innovation. Hitler personally admired Henry Ford, you'll recall, and kept Ford's portrait in his office. The mass production of automobiles made them into an everyday convenience in America, and this was an accomplishment that impressed Hitler, a man who loved cars himself. The technical accomplishments of the US motion picture industry were another praiseworthy aspect of America, in Hitler's mind. The number and quality of American films was unmatched in the world, and Hitler and his followers watched them as avidly as anyone else.

On the minus side, the Nazis looked down on American culture as shallow and tawdry and deplored its large population of African Americans. The Nazi prejudice against people of African ancestry was as strong as any of their other prejudices. Before Hitler came to power, jazz music was popular in Germany and African-American entertainers frequently performed there. After the Nazis took over, all that ended and jazz music was outright banned.

The Nazis did admire the European-American conquest of American lands. As early as 1928, Hitler spoke enthusiastically about how the Americans "gunned down the millions of Redskins to a few hundred thousand and now keep the modest remnant under observation in a cage." The Nazis would later use the white American conquest of the West as a template for their quest for *Lebensraum*, living space, for the German people in the vast open spaces of Poland and the Soviet Union in the European East. Like the American West, it was empty land ripe for the taking; empty that is, if you don't count the Slavs already living there, which the Nazis most emphatically did not.

The Nazis admired the US Immigration Act of 1924. It did not escape their notice that not only did the US ban entire races of people from immigrating to its shores, but even in the case of European immigration, America's doors were open to immigrants from those so-called "Nordic" countries—Germany and the British Isles—while immigration from Italy and Eastern Europe was tightly restricted. The Nazis applauded American immigration policies, which seemed to them very sensible.

The Nazis were also interested in the legal status of Native people in the United States—that is, that they were restricted to reservations and denied US citizenship. A whole racial category of people who were US nationals but not US citizens, well, that was just the sort of legal arrangement the Nazis might find useful for Jewish Germans. To be fair, the US government did grant full citizenship to all Native people in the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, but the German legal scholars who were working this problem were not interested in how to remove second-class status, but in how to create it.

They also took a good look at the so-called Insular Cases, the Supreme Court decisions regarding territories seized by the United States during the Spanish-American War. We talked about the Insular Cases in episode 13, and you may recall the debate in the US was sometimes framed as "Does the Constitution follow the flag?" That is to say, the question was whether full Constitutional protections automatically apply in any territory administered by the United States. The US Supreme Court answered that question in the negative, meaning that inhabitants of those territories, most notably the Philippines, do not automatically have US citizenship, nor even full US Constitutional rights, such as the right to trial by jury. Even in the case of Puerto Rico, where Congress specifically granted US citizenship to Puerto Ricans by statute in 1917, the Supreme Court held this did not automatically mean the people of Puerto Rico were entitled to the full range of rights available to citizens within the United States. Here again were some potentially useful examples for German lawyers.

Of course, it has to be said that the United States was by no means the only democratic nation that held colonial territories where the inhabitants did not enjoy full citizenship and legal equality in the nation that ruled them. You don't have to look any farther than the colonial empires of Britain or France to find far larger numbers of people in that conditions, let alone the colonial possessions of smaller democratic nations like Belgium or the Netherlands.

The most obvious example of different classes of citizenship within the US, though, has to be the status of African Americans. For more than fifty years, the legal systems in many American states had been carefully crafting legal limitations on the rights of African Americans.

When you think about legal limitations on the rights of African Americans, the first aspect that comes to mind is segregation. Many US states, especially the former Confederate states, had legal regimens that enforced separation of white and Black people. Schools were segregated,

trains and buses were segregated, even public bathrooms were segregated. Some jurisdictions had laws in place that prohibited white and Black people from playing checkers together.

The German lawyers considering anti-Semitic laws in Germany studied the American regime of segregation, but soon dismissed it as unworkable in Germany, due to the basic problem of how to distinguish ethnic Germans from Jewish people, which would have been much more difficult than distinguishing African Americans from white Americans. Also, as one German official in the ministry of justice put it: “[T]he Jews in Germany represent a thoroughly extraordinary economic power. As long as they have a voice in economic affairs in our German Fatherland, as they do now, so long as they have the most beautiful automobiles, the most beautiful motorboats, as long as they play a prominent role in all pleasure spots and resorts, and everywhere that costs money, as long as all this is true I do not believe they can really be segregated from the body of the German people...”

I can't help noticing in that quote not only the stiffly envious tone in describing the assumed wealth and privilege of Jewish Germans, but also the implication that segregation was only workable in the US because its African American population were a people already restrained by a long history of oppression and poverty.

Nazi legal experts were less interested in America's regime of segregation than they were in America's regulation of sex and marriage between people of different races. I talked about this in episode 248. It was largely taken for granted in the US of the early twentieth century that interracial relationships that produced mixed-race children represented an undesirable “weakening” or “dilution” of the white race. Additionally, we've seen a number of times now the assumption among many white Americans that any African-American man is a barely restrained rapist, likely to sexually assault a white woman at the slightest of opportunities.

The Nazis held similar views regarding Jewish German men. Every Jewish man was seen as a potential rapist, a threat to nice German girls, while children born of mixed German and Jewish parentage were seen as threatening to the racial integrity of the German people and nation. I already told you how soon after Hitler became chancellor, a law was passed to provide no-interest loans to newlyweds, loans that would be forgiven at the rate of 25% for each child born to the couple, and how this benefit was only available to German couples, thus creating a financial incentive for ethnic Germans to marry other ethnic Germans and not people of other ethnicities, as well as an incentive for ethnic Germans in particular to have additional children.

But what about negative incentives? The Nazis wanted, to the greatest extent possible, to prohibit Germans from having children with people of other ethnic groups, for nakedly racist and eugenic reasons. How do you go about doing that? Once again, they turned to American law for inspiration.

In 30 of America's 48 states, marriages between people of different races were invalid. This much was not unique to the United States. Other countries had similar laws, Australia for

example. But in many of those states, interracial marriage was not only invalid; it was a criminal offense. I discussed the laws in Virginia back in episode 248, but it wasn't only Virginia. In Maryland, to take another example, marriage between a white person and any person who had at least one great-grandparent of African ancestry was not only prohibited, but an attempt to marry was punishable by a prison term of not less than 18 months, nor more than ten years, a pretty stiff penalty.

Historically speaking, the criminalization of marriage is extremely rare in any country and under any legal system, with the exception of bigamy. There was no other country in the world at the time that criminalized marriages. Even South Africa, which did have a law criminalizing extramarital sexual relations between people of different races, permitted interracial marriage. It is striking that even the Nazi lawyers studying the US system expressed surprise at how harsh American law was. Did they really put people in prison for getting married?

But if you're going to regulate marriage between people of different racial categories, you're also going to have to come up with legal definitions of who is in which category. Again, the Nazis looked to US law for guidance, and again what they found seemed to them unreasonably strict. For example, in the Maryland law I cited a moment ago, a person is defined as "Black" if they have even one Black great-grandparent. Virginia's law was stricter still, enforcing the so-called "one drop" rule; in other words, a person was Black if they had even one Black ancestor, no matter how many generations removed. Only a person whose ancestry was entirely European counted as "white."

Again, I have trouble wrapping my head around this, but the Nazi legal experts tasked with the job of drafting race laws for Germany found the American way unacceptable, not because they found it too liberal or egalitarian, but because they found it too narrow and harsh.

[music: Wagner, Overture from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*]

Back in the Belle Époque days of the podcast, I talked a bit about transatlantic passenger ships. Longtime listeners no doubt remember those days, and remember as well that German lines like Hamburg-Amerika and Norddeutscher Lloyd competed with British companies for these lucrative routes. When the war broke out, most German passenger liners were seized at sea or kept in German ports or interned in neutral American ports. Ultimately, they were seized by the Allied powers.

Germany went back into the transatlantic liner business after the war, and Norddeutscher Lloyd built and operated two high-speed steamships, *Europa* and *Bremen*, on the transatlantic route. They were the fastest passenger ships of their era, and a source of pride to Germany. Each ship was fitted with a seaplane and a catapult launcher, making them mini-aircraft carriers. The planes were used to deliver mail to the destination port before the ship itself arrived, meaning that *Europa* and *Bremen* could deliver transatlantic mail faster than anyone else.

In the 1930s, the Norddeutscher Lloyd pier in New York City was the scene of frequent anti-Nazi protests. Some of the loudest criticism of the German government's anti-Semitic policies came from the United States, and especially from New York City. New York had the largest urban Jewish population of any city in the world, and it wasn't just that many New Yorkers were Jewish. Many were Jewish immigrants from the former Russian Empire, or children of such immigrants. Those immigrants left their native country to escape persecution, and they and their children saw in Germany events that paralleled their own family history and were naturally sympathetic to the victims.

On the warm summer evening of July 26, 1935, anti-Nazi protestors, including many Communists, were demonstrating at the pier, where *Bremen* was docked at the time. Five of the protestors made their way aboard the ship, pulled down the swastika flag that flew from the jack staff at the bow of the ship, and tossed it into the harbor.

The five protestors were arrested, and the US State Department, not wanting a confrontation with Germany, expressed regret that a German national symbol had not "received the respect to which it is entitled."

That apology didn't satisfy many Germans. The German press spent the rest of the summer fulminating over the incident. On September 6, the five accused were brought before a New York magistrate named Louis Brodsky. Brodsky was Jewish, born in 1883 in the Russian Empire. He had come to the US as a child with his parents and graduated from NYU Law School in 1900, at the remarkably young age of 17. In other words, he was a perfect example of the kind of Jewish immigrant I was describing a few minutes ago, the kind who looked particularly askance at Nazi treatment of Jewish Germans.

Magistrates were low-ranking judicial officers who seldom did anything more important than criminal arraignments, bail hearings, and the like. But Brodsky already had a reputation for using his position to take strong stands. Just a few months earlier, Brodsky had dismissed charges of indecency against two women arrested for dancing nude in a club in Greenwich Village on the grounds that in this modern world of 1935 mere nudity could no longer be considered indecent.

When the defendants from the *Bremen* incident appeared before him, Brodsky took the opportunity to declare the swastika flag a "flag of piracy" and that to fly it was "a gratuitously brazen flaunting of an emblem which symbolizes all that is antithetical to American ideals..." His denunciations were unquestionably true, although whether it was appropriate for a low-level judicial official like Brodsky to make them is debatable. But he did, and he ordered charges against the five defendants dismissed.

The State Department issued another formal apology to the German government, but the propaganda opportunity was too good to pass up. The Nazis used the *Bremen* incident and Brodsky's decision to justify the passage of three laws, one regarding the swastika flag, and two regarding the legal status of Jewish people in Germany. The laws were passed barely a week

later, at the Nazi Party's 1935 Nuremberg Rally. Here was the one and only time that the German Reichstag met outside of Berlin during the Nazi period, and these laws are known to history as the Nuremberg Laws.

The first law made the Nazi Party's swastika flag, designed by Adolf Hitler himself, the one and only flag of the new Germany. Recall that during the Weimar period, the German flag was the black, red, and gold tricolor familiar to us today. Shortly after the Nazis took full control of the German government in March 1933, that flag was replaced. The old Imperial black, white, and red tricolor was restored and the Nazi swastika flag was made equal to it, so Germany had two national flags from 1933 to 1935.

These changes in the German flag laws have an obvious symbolic interpretation. The scrapping of the Weimar colors represents the rejection of the Weimar era, while the dual-flag regime can be understood as representing the two right-wing political forces that overthrew the Weimar government—the old monarchist right-wing and the new Nazi Party.

But that was two years ago. Since then, the old right wing has faded away. Hindenburg is dead, Schleicher was killed, and all political parties other than the Nazi Party have disbanded. And so goes the imperial tricolor. Germany is fully a Nazi state now, and so the Nazi flag becomes the sole German flag. At Nuremberg, they framed this as a response to the disrespect shown to the swastika flag in New York.

The second of the three laws was styled the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor." It forbade both marriage and extra-marital relations between German citizens and Jewish people. Jewish people were forbidden to fly the German flag. And one further provision prohibited Jewish households from employing German women under the age of 45. Here you see an expression of that belief that Jewish men represent a threat to German women.

Now, to enforce such a law, you have to define what it means to be German or Jewish, and hence came the third law, called the "Reich Citizenship Law." Under this law, only a person of German blood was a citizen. Others were subjects of the state, but not citizens of it. The law delegated to the Interior Ministry how to implement the law, and out of the various debates between Party leaders and legal experts came this regimen:

First, a person who was less than one-quarter Jewish counted as a German. Proof of one's German ancestry would eventually become necessary for employment and many other activities of everyday life, and most Germans would have to get their ancestry certified by the government in writing.

Second, anyone who was three-quarters or more Jewish was Jewish, and was not eligible for citizenship.

Third came the people in-between: those who were at least one-quarter Jewish but less than three-quarters Jewish. Such people were designated *Mischlinge*, which you could translate into English as “half-breeds.” *Mischlinge* of the second degree, the ones who were less than half Jewish, were permitted to marry Germans. *Mischlinge* of the first degree, people who were half Jewish or more, could only marry other *Mischlinge* or people classified as Jewish. If they chose the latter, they would be reclassified as Jewish themselves and their children would be classified as Jewish. Otherwise, *Mischlinge* were eligible for citizenship, although in practice they also experienced discrimination in a number of areas.

The passage of these laws opened further opportunities for legal and social discrimination against Jewish people, now that the ethnicity of every person in Germany was strictly defined. The next step was to dismiss all Jewish veterans from the civil service. You’ll recall that the Nazis had dismissed all Jewish civil servants back in 1933, except for war veterans, who were exempted at the request of President Hindenburg. Well, Hindenburg was now dead and even that exemption was gone.

By the end of the year, the government would impose the same racial and ethnic classification regime on Romani people in Germany and also upon Germany’s small population of Afro-Germans.

The German government would explain and defend these new laws by pointing to the example of the United States, a country widely seen as a model democracy and also one frequently critical of the Nazis. They pointed to the example of former world heavyweight champion boxer Jack Johnson, a name familiar to Germans, reminding them how Johnson was forced to leave the United States to avoid prosecution for being in a relationship with a white woman. Johnson was now living in the US once again, but the Nazis noted that because of his white wife, there were many US states where he could not enter without risking prosecution.

I’d also like to point out, since in our time a lot of people are confused about this, that the classification system imposed by the Nuremberg Laws was strictly based on a person’s ancestry and family heritage. It was a persecution based not on belief, but on blood. It did not matter if a Jewish person in Germany was a devout Jew or a High Holy Days Jew. It did not matter if they were agnostic or atheist. It did not matter if they were Lutheran or Catholic, or a convert to any other faith tradition. It was about the person’s ancestry, full stop.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Kathleen and Kenneth for their kind donations, and thank you to Gabrielle for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kathleen and Kenneth and Gabrielle help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone. They also keep Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century happy, by convincing her I’m not wasting my time on this thing, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to

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I'm going to be attending the 80th World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago from September 1-5. This will be my first Worldcon, so I'm pretty excited. They've scheduled me for a table talk on Saturday the 3rd, so if you happen to be at the con, come on by my table talk and say hi, cause I'm not sure anyone's going to come, to be honest...

Astute listeners will have noticed that I don't sound like myself this week. That's because I cracked one of my eyeteeth and had to have it pulled. That whistling sound you hear is the sound of air passing through the space where I used to have a tooth. Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century says I talk like an eight-year-old now, and for the same reason. A partial is on order, but you can expect me to sound like this for the next three episodes or so.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn to Italy, consider its second attempt to conquer Ethiopia, and learn that Fascism is Not an Article for Export. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Since I mentioned Jack Johnson today, now might be a good time to say a word about the African-American heavyweight boxer who was in many ways his successor, Joseph Louis Barrow, born in Alabama in 1914. When Joe was 12 year old, his family fled Ku Klux Klan harassment in Alabama and moved to Detroit, where Joe and his brother worked for the Ford Motor Company.

His mother wanted him to become a violinist, but Joe took an interest in boxing, against her wishes, when he was seventeen, keeping it a secret from her by boxing under the name Joe Louis. He was very good, and two years later, he turned pro.

As a pro, Joe Louis won a string of successes, but had difficulty lining up fights against the top white boxers. Jack Johnson was still remembered in the boxing world, resented as much for his flamboyant and abrasive personal style as for his legacy as the only Black boxer to win the heavyweight championship. In order to ease the way for Louis to take on serious opponents, his team came up with a set of rules. Joe Louis would not taunt his white opponents, nor gloat over their defeats. He would keep his personal life in order. And he would never have his picture taken with a white woman.

In 1935, Louis fought former heavyweight champion Primo Carnera of Italy. Louis knocked him out in the sixth round. The match took on a political dimension because Carnera was Italian and the match took place during rising tensions between Italy and Ethiopia. Americans of all races who sympathized with Ethiopia took a lot of satisfaction from Carnera's defeat, especially at the hands of a Black man.

Louis became a celebrity athlete. It helped that the boxing world was missing a star. Former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey had retired in 1929, leaving the title to a string of unimpressive boxers who each held the title only for a short time.

The American press began to embrace Louis, giving him tacky nicknames like the Mahogany Mauler or The Chocolate Chopper, or, the one that stuck, The Brown Bomber.

Louis was now seen as a strong contender to take the title from the reigning champion, James Braddock. But on his way, he was matched against a German boxer named Max Schmeling, another former heavyweight champion. Schmeling was 30 years old, nine years Louis' senior, and widely seen as a boxer on his way down rather than up. But Schmeling was one of the first to take advantage of the relatively new development of motion pictures of sporting events to study Joe Louis' moves. A few days before the match, Schmeling publicly announced that he had identified a weakness in Joe Louis' boxing style that he intended to exploit.

This was widely dismissed as bluster, but on the day of the match, June 16, 1936, Schmeling knocked Louis out in the twelfth round, before a crowd of 70,000 and a radio audience of 57 million. It was Louis' first defeat in his professional career, and the first time he was knocked out.

In Harlem that night, said poet Langston Hughes, he saw grown men weeping and women sitting on the curbs with their heads in their hands. In Arkansas, a seven-year-old African-American girl named Marguerite Johnson listened on the radio. Later, as poet Maya Angelou, she recalled that moment. "It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another black man hanging on a tree...If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings."

Adolf Hitler congratulated the winner and sent Mrs. Schmeling flowers. Schmeling reciprocated, telling the press that thoughts of his country and his *Führer* had given him the strength to succeed.

Despite this momentary lapse, though, Schmeling was not exactly a loyal Nazi. He had declined to join the Party, his wife was an ethnic Czech actress, and his manager was Jewish, and he would retain his manager despite Nazi pressure to fire him. Nevertheless, the Nazis made hay over Schmeling's underdog win for their own propaganda purposes.

Meanwhile, Joe Louis finally got his title fight with James Braddock in 1937, and won the match and the heavyweight title. But he wasn't satisfied. He told the press, "I don't want to be called champ until I whip Max Schmeling."

They would finally meet for a rematch, at Yankee Stadium, the same venue as their earlier fight, on June 22, 1938, before another capacity crowd and a huge nationwide radio audience. Relations between Germany and the United States had deteriorated substantially during those two years, putting white American sports fans into the somewhat awkward position of having to choose between rooting for Black America's favorite boxer, or for Adolf Hitler's. Actually, white American sports fans didn't find the choice all that difficult and broke heavily for Louis, making this moment historically significant as the first time large numbers of white American fans were rooting for a Black athlete in competition against a white one.

You can include on that list my own father, who spoke of Joe Louis in glowing terms for the rest of his life.

Louis went into the fight after deciding the proper strategy for beating Schmeling was to go at him hard from the beginning, and that's exactly what he did. This rematch lasted precisely 124 seconds, during which time Louis landed 42 punches to Schmeling's two. Schmeling went down three times; the third time, the referee ended the fight.

Schmeling was injured so badly that he had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance. Later, Schmeling would recall his ambulance ride through Harlem, listening to the cheering crowds, the street musicians, the repeated calling of Joe Louis' name.

That was the end of Max Schmeling's celebrity. The Nazis would no longer hold him up as a paragon of German virtues. When the war came, he was drafted into a paratroop regiment, until he was wounded in Crete in 1941.

Joe Louis would hold the heavyweight championship until 1949, the longest reign and the most title defenses fought of any boxer in history. When the war came, Louis enlisted in the US Army and was assigned to one of the Army's African-American cavalry units at Fort Riley, Kansas, although the Army later realized Louis was more valuable performing exhibition matches for the entertainment of soldiers and as a military recruiter in the African-American community. One other African-American boxer he worked with in the Army was a younger man named Walker Smith, who boxed under the name Sugar Ray Robinson.

When he was asked about recruiting Black soldiers into a segregated Army, Louis told a reporter, "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't gonna fix them."

Louis also fought in charity bouts for military relief work. After the war, this would be his undoing when the IRS audited him and counted the revenue from those bouts as his income,

even though he had never been paid any of it. This left him heavily in debt. He struggled in his later years, and became addicted to cocaine.

Max Schmeling got a job after the war as an advertising spokesman for Coca-Cola in Germany. Eventually he owned his own bottling plant and became quite successful. Schmeling visited the United States every year to see Joe Louis. They became good friends. It is said that Schmeling helped Louis out financially during the difficult times.

Joe Louis died in 1981, at the age of 66. US President Ronald Reagan granted an exemption so Louis could be buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. One of the pallbearers was Max Schmeling. Reagan said of Joe Louis that “his career was an indictment of racial bigotry and a source of pride and inspiration to millions...”

Max Schmeling died in 2005, at the age of 99.

[music: Closing Theme]