

The Bullfighter from Brooklyn

BY RACHEL MILLER

The Sidney Franklin Collection at the American Jewish Historical Society in Manhattan gives a unique and surprising perspective across a range of histories.



Sidney Franklin on the set of The Kid from Spain with a copy of Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon, 1932.

It was an unexpected moment when Sidney Franklin stepped into a bullring in Mexico in 1923, thereby launching a multi-decade career as the world's

first Jewish bullfighter.

Born in 1903 in Brooklyn, the fifth of nine children of Abram and Lubba Frumkin, Russian-born Orthodox Jews, Sidney grew up in a two-story

building in Park Slope. As a teenager attracted to and engaged in the visual and theatrical arts, he took Franklin (after Benjamin Franklin) as a stage name, and it stuck. The new surname allowed him to escape the attention of his father, who was a policeman both in the community and at home, and enabled him to indulge his flair for performance. In 1922, after one particularly violent exchange between the two, Franklin left Brooklyn and hopped a ship for Mexico, where within a year he transformed himself into a toreador. In his 1952 book, *Bullfighter from Brooklyn: An Autobiography of Sidney Franklin*, he wrote, "Certainly none of us ever dreamed that my pa's hot temper had spawned a matador."

From Artist to Toreador

Initially Franklin made a living in Mexico City as a silkscreen artist; his work often depicted bullfighting on posters that promoted the events. But he shifted from depicter to actor with training from the established Mexican matador, Rodolfo Gaona. In 1928 Franklin debuted in Spain to

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Left: *Bull and matador* drawing by Sidney Franklin.

Below: A good friend of Franklin's, Ernest Hemingway, gave Franklin this rhinoceros foot in 1933.



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great success. Over his thirty-year career he became known by such snappy monikers as "El Torero de la Torah," "El Yanqui," and "The Bullfighter from Brooklyn," and he estimated that he'd killed over 2,000 bulls; in return the bulls managed to gore him a number of times, necessitating surgery and subsequent revisions to those surgeries, all of which unfortunately plagued him until his 1976 death in New York. In the early 1930s Franklin also made a brief foray into Hollywood: he played himself alongside Eddie Cantor, who posed as a bullfighter in the MGM comedy *The Kid from Spain*. According to Franklin's biographer, Bart Paul, important to any reading of Franklin's life was his closeted existence as a gay man in the matador culture of machismo. But getting at the truths of his life is challenging, as he was known to be fond of embellishment and storytelling.

Shortly after his Spanish debut in 1929, Franklin and bullfighting aficionado Ernest Hemingway struck up a close friendship. Calling Franklin "a charming companion," Hemingway wrote an account

of him in *Death in the Afternoon*, describing him as "brave with a cold, serene, and intelligent valor" and "one of the most skillful, graceful, and slow manipulators of cape fighting today." Franklin and Hemingway maintained close ties until their relationship cooled in 1937 while serving as correspondents during the Spanish Civil War. In that final year of their friendship, they lived together in a two-room suite at the Hotel Florida in Madrid, where they entertained Hemingway's friends, including John Dos Passos, Virginia Cowles, and Hemingway's future wife, Martha Gellhorn.

Searching for Sidney

The Sidney Franklin Collection, housed at the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) at the Center for Jewish History (CJH) in Lower Manhattan, serves up a rich visual representation of Franklin's life through items

and documents collected over time by his family members. When I, a CJH archivist, created an online finding aid for the collection in early 2010, the collection consisted primarily of photographs of Franklin performing in bullrings and posing with famous matadors and well-known Hollywood figures, and of clippings that documented his exploits. I was soon inspired by a Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual conference session on search engine optimization for finding aids, so I added a link for Franklin's Wikipedia entry to the collection's finding aid—which was a general suggestion that the SAA presenters had put forth to optimize finding aids within Google's search results. Within a few weeks, the finding aid

rose from the third to the first page of results in a Google search for Franklin's name. This later led to the creation and regular editing of other collection-related Wikipedia entries, as well as the hosting of Wikipedia "edit-a-thons," as standard parts of CJH archivists' work (described in "Bringing Archives into Wikipedia" by Kevin Schlottmann and Leanora Lange in *Metropolitan Archivist*, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/159537208/Metropolitan-Archivist-Vol-19-No-2-Summer-2013>).

And then a niece of Franklin's reached out to the AJHS, delighted to have just discovered the finding aid for her uncle's collection. She came into AJHS for a visit to view the collection (of which she had not been previously aware) and to donate additional materials, including photographs, artwork, and recordings of Franklin singing ditties in Spanish. She also supplied detailed descriptions of his goings and surgeries, lending new insights into the "body" behind the collection.

The Sidney Franklin Collection (finding aid at <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pid=635255>) provides a unique perspective on various histories—Brooklyn, American Jews, bullfighting, queer—and a touch of literary history too. ■