

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## THE PRIDE OF THE YANKEES

LOU GEHRIG, GARY COOPER,  
and the Making of a Classic

RICHARD SANDOMIR

### The luckiest author tells story of iconic Gehrig movie

By HILLEL KUTTLER

**AS HE WATCHED** *The Pride of the Yankees* more than a decade ago, Richard Sandomir was struck anew by the film's climactic scene of Gary Cooper, playing the ailing baseball star Lou Gehrig, proclaiming himself to be "the luckiest man on the face of the Earth."

Like millions of viewers since the film's release, Sandomir wondered how Gehrig could've felt fortunate after being forced to retire due to the progressive muscle paralysis that would kill him in 1941.

The remarks "just sort of built on me," Sandomir explained by phone, so he began researching newspaper reports of Gehrig's Yankee Stadium speech.

He bought a DVD of the black-and-white movie and ultimately watched it start-to-finish about 30 times, plus 100 times more to examine specific scenes minutely.

Just before this summer's 75th anniversary of the film's release, Sandomir published his third book, *The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper, and the Making of a Classic* (Hachette Books)—an in-depth look at how America's first serious, sports-themed movie came to the screen.

While the film's central character is Gehrig, the book's is his wife, Chicago native Eleanor Twitchell Gehrig. Plumbing the archives of the film's producer Samuel Goldwyn and the files of Eleanor's lawyer George Pollack, Sandomir details her hands-on role in shaping the script, correcting factual errors, and preserving her late hus-

band's legacy.

Sandomir, a Queens, N.Y., native who is Jewish, didn't visit Chicago to research Eleanor's early life because so much material is available in her 1976 memoir, *My Luke and I*, he said. Sandomir's book notes that her father, Frank, owned real estate and was a concessionaire in the Chicago Park District whose businesses had failed by the time Eleanor and Lou met in about 1931, although the film depicts the couple first meeting during Frank Twitchell's prosperous period.

Many books have been written on Gehrig's Hall of Fame career as the New York Yankees' first baseman who slugged 493 home runs and set a record of 2,130 consecutive games played that stood for 56 years and earned him the moniker Iron Horse, but this is the first book about the film.

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The poignancy of the Gehrigs' relationship being cut short by the disease "is really what resonates with people," eminent broadcaster Bob Costas told *JUF News*. "It's the circumstances of his death, and the movie, that make Gehrig an enduring part of baseball history."

Costas added: "It was a great movie in its time, and it's a great movie still because people view it through not just the story it tells, but *when* the story was told."

Sandomir was well positioned to undertake the project, having spent a quarter-century covering the sports media and the business of sports for *The New York Times* before shifting last December to the newspaper's obituaries desk. He recently wrote a *Times*

article about the National Baseball Hall of Fame once considering a proposal to reinter on its Cooperstown, N.Y., grounds the cremated remains of Gehrig and other inductees.

"Part of the point of the book was simply that we know so much about Lou from the movie, because there's so little else to go on. The newsreels are incomplete. When you see videos pop up, it's usually of [teammate] Babe Ruth, not Lou Gehrig," he said.

Perhaps Sandomir's key revelation is that Gehrig's "luckiest man" speech has been lost to history, with only partial audio and video recordings surviving and with newspaper accounts varying in transcribing the ex-Yankee's words. Drawing from those sources and from Eleanor's recollection to Goldwyn of the speech's wording, Sandomir relates in 17 sentences and fewer than 300 words how he thinks Gehrig's remarks went, a version different than what Cooper spoke on-screen.

Trying to ascertain the precise wording "was frustrating, but it was fun," Sandomir said.

Gehrig's speech, delivered in an on-field ceremony between games of a July 4, 1939, double-header, "remains unmatched as a piece of athletic oratory nearly eight decades later and remains a significant element of his soulful legacy," Sandomir writes. Still, he continues, so powerful was the film's depiction of it that "Cooper's rendition has become the de facto version of record, replacing Gehrig's original. ... Has any other rendering of a historic speech ever become so closely identified with the actor?"

Cooper's daughter, Maria Cooper Janis, was similarly struck. In a separate interview, Janis said that while walking along a corridor in Yankee Stadium last year for an event benefiting research into amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (the disease that killed Gehrig), she passed enor-

mous photographs of the team's legendary players.

She halted at one.

"I couldn't tell if it was my father or Lou Gehrig. They didn't look alike, but they *did* look alike," she said. "How wonderful that my father was a vehicle for people to continue to remember someone as great as Lou Gehrig."

Janis said Cooper "loved baseball," and she remembers attending minor league games with her parents at Hollywood's Gilmore Field. In the book, Sandomir writes that he closely examined the film's baseball scenes and could debunk the myth that they were shot in reverse to account for Cooper's being right-handed, whereas Gehrig was a lefty.

An exquisite double-irony Sandomir's *Pride* reveals is this: *The New Yorker's* Niven Busch Jr. wrote an unflattering profile of Gehrig in 1929, yet in 1941 he successfully persuaded Goldwyn, by then his boss in Hollywood, to make a film on the recently deceased ballplayer after showing Goldwyn a newsreel of Gehrig's retirement ceremony that prompted Goldwyn to cry. (Goldwyn, a Polish-Jewish immigrant who knew nothing about baseball, framed *Pride* as a love story.) And shortly after *Pride* finished filming, Busch married Teresa Wright, who would earn an Academy Award nomination for playing Eleanor Gehrig.

Journalist Griffin Miller said that Sandomir, her husband, eagerly shared tidbits uncovered during his research—like learning through Eleanor's letters to Goldwyn that she wasn't as sweet as Wright portrayed her to be.

"This book," Miller said of Sandomir, "was a labor of love." ■

*Hillel Kuttler is an editor and writer. His feature articles on history's role in contemporary people's lives have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.*