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Immortal Loser

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Zagadka Kieseritzky'ego, by Tomasz Lissowski and Bartłomiej Macieja, 1996, Wydawnictwo DiG (Warsaw), Softcover, Polish Algebraic Notation, 294 pp., \$24.95

Lionel Kieseritzky (1806-1853) was one of the very strongest chessplayers of his time. Following the death of De Labourdonnais in 1840, and Saint Amant's defeat to Staunton in 1843, he was the logical next contender for the unofficial world championship. He was particularly good at blindfold chess, being able to win four such games simultaneously. His chess was fast, direct, and unscientific. Morphy did not arrive in Europe until 1858; Kieseritzky was, therefore, one of the last and one of the greatest of the ultra-romantics.



However, Kieseritzky was unlucky. Gossip and slander forced him to leave his hometown (in present-day Estonia) and settle in Paris in 1839. Subsequently, a hoped-for match with the world's best player, Staunton, never took place. In the first-ever international tournament (London, 1851) he blundered and lost to the eventual winner, Anderssen, in the first round. He died in a Paris hospital, following some sort of mental illness, when he was just 47, and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. In his apartment were found bundles of unsold copies of his book written in his own, specially-invented chess notation, which needless to say never caught on. And if all that was not bad enough, he will forever be principally known for being the "Immortal Loser."

Yes, Kieseritzky was unlucky... until now. Polish writer and historian Tomasz Lissowski, and young Polish IM Bartłomiej Macieja have collaborated on a detailed biography, the first anywhere. Their Polish-language book is obviously the result of painstaking research not just reaching for well-known sources, but actively pursuing rare archival material, in several countries and in several languages. The result is a packed, authoritative work that tries to unravel some questions about his life (hence the title, *The Enigma of Kieseritzky*) and overturns some oft-repeated misconceptions.



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For example, the disappointed authors fail to find concrete evidence that any of Kieseritzky's family or ancestors had Polish connections; it seems they were thoroughly Germanic, despite the Polish-sounding surname and the suppositions of many writers. Would the book have been written had this been known from the beginning?

It is divided into 11 chapters:

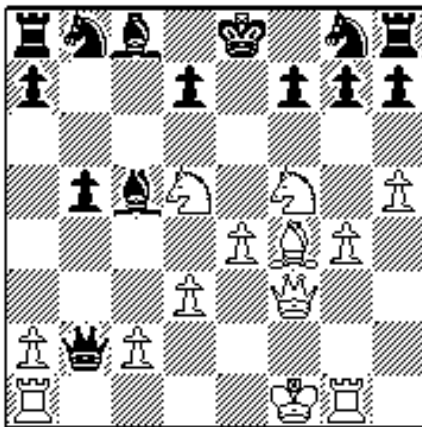
- I. The history of one game
- II. Chess at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries
- III. A short outline of the history of Livonia
- IV. Lionel Kieseritzky in the years 1806-1839
- V. The Kieseritzky clan in Livonia
- VI. Kieseritzky in Paris. The years 1839-1853
- VII. Games
- VIII. Problems and combinations
- IX. "Makarczyk told me..."
- X. The Kieseritzky Gambit
- XI. Conclusion

There is as much history and various sideline discussions as there are games and strict biography. It is probably excessive to have so much about Livonia, the region where Kieseritzky was born, except that because Livonia was for a while an extremity of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, it carries significance for Polish readers. The oversize Chapter VI makes up more than a third of the book.

Inevitably, Kieseritzky is best known for being the loser in a game that must be one of the most reproduced of all time (and here it is once more):

Anderssen-Kieseritzky, London, 1851

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4 Qh4+ 4.Kf1 b5 5.Bxb5 Nf6 6.Nf3 Qh6 7.d3 Nh5 8.Nh4 Qg5 9.Nf5 c6 10.g4 Nf6 11.Rg1 cxb5 12.h4 Qg6 13.h5 Qg5 14.Qf3 Ng8 15.Bxf4 Qf6 16.Nc3 Bc5 17.Nd5 Qxb2 (*See Diagram*)

**18.Bd6 Bxg1**

(18...Qxa1+! 19.Ke2 Qb2 would have turned the game around and rewrote history.) **19.e5 Qxa1+ 20.Ke2 Na6 21.Nxg7+ Kd8 22.Qf6+ Nxf6 23.Be7** mate 1-0.

It is Kieseritzky's misfortune that a casual game played at a very rapid tempo, and which he

happened to lose, should quickly become known as the "Immortal." But how did it end? When the game appeared in *La Régence*, which Kieseritzky edited, Black is shown as having resigned after 20.Ke2 - so, apparently the queen sacrifice never took place. The authors muse:

Judging that the publication of the whole game, together with its mating conclusion, could harm his reputation as an outstanding player, did Kieseritzky really carry out 'cosmetic surgery,' cutting off the last moves?

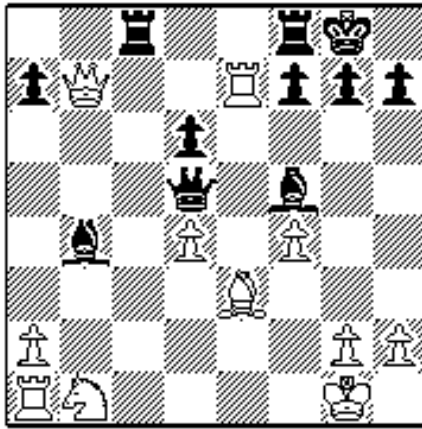
Yet, then to print in his own magazine the score of the game shortly after it was played, when the matter was still fresh in the minds of the onlookers, inevitably condemns itself to exposure. Supposing Kieseritzky wrote the truth? (p. 19.)

Presumably that would have reduced the game's attractiveness to posterity. Anyway, the authors spend most of the first chapter (20 pages) comparing the analyses of Steinitz, and Chigorin, etc., and adding their own opinions.

There are other games and fragments scattered throughout the book (not confined to the 19th century alone - the authors are fond of drawing attention to parallels and precedents), but in Chapter VII we are presented with a concentration of over 140 of Kieseritzky's games. They are explicitly sourced; most have annotations, many of them contemporary (though frankly the comments of the period are sometimes almost worthless). Here are two short examples of the style and standard of play, (pp. 206, 212):

NN-Kieseritzky, Paris, 1847

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Qh4 5.Nb5 Qxe4+ 6.Be2 Bb4+ 7.c3 Ba5 8.0-0 Nf6 9.Bf3 Qe7 10.Re1 Ne5 11.Be4 0-0 12.f4 Qc5+ 13.Nd4 Nxe4 14.Rxe4 Nc6 15.b4 Qd5 16.Qc2 Nxd4 17.cxd4 Bxb4 18.Be3 d6 19.Re7 Bf5 20.Qxc7 Rac8 21.Qxb7 (*See Diagram*)



21...Rc1+ 22.Bxc1
Qxd4+ 23.Be3 Qd1+
24.Kf2 Be1+ 25.Kf1 Bg3
mate 0-1.

*Kieseritzky-Martin St
Leon, Paris, 1849*

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.Nf3
c5 4.Bc4 d6 5.Ng5 Nh6
6.f4 Be7 7.Qh5 0-0 8.0-0
a6 9.a4 Qe8 10.Ra3 Bxg5
11.fxg5 Ng4 12.Rh3 Qxe4
13.Rxf7 Be6 14.Bxe6

Qxe6 15.Rxg7+ Kxg7 16.Qxh7 mate 1-0.

A feature of the book is the enormous amount of reprinted material (translated into Polish). Hence it very often resembles a carefully cleaned-up scrapbook. Kieseritzky's letters home are quoted at length. There are large sections from the *Berliner Schachzeitung*, and other periodicals. Maps, family trees, and even poetry...

Not only that, but there are sub-sections specially written for this book by experts in their fields. A genealogist, and a psychologist, for example, are given their say about Kieseritzky. The problemists Jan Rusinek and Andrzej Lewandowski are also consulted. An entire chapter (IX) is given over to an absorbing interview with IM Romuald Grabczewski, who makes many objective observations:

Analysis of the games demonstrates that Kieseritzky was an aggressive, attacking player. However, the means of attack that he and his contemporaries had at their disposal were, from today's point of view, poor. It was sufficient for one side to carry out an assault with the h- and g-pawns, and right away commentators would be hurrying with praise, writing about a pawn avalanche that sweeps everything in its path. Rare were the instances of a co-ordinated piece attack; there was a lack of flexible placements that allow, for example, the execution of a blow in the centre if the opponent opens up on the flank. (p. 255.)

The Kieseritzky Gambit, 1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.h4 g4 5.Ne5, is also given a chapter (X) to itself. The authors select and annotate ten of the most famous games that traversed those moves (e.g., Spassky-Fischer, 1960; Planinc-Korchnoy, 1975). What is missing, though, is any discussion of the gambit's origins and development. Moreover, Kieseritzky's theoretical and practical input (such as it was) is never even mentioned here.

Any more criticisms? Well, a few of the diagrams are

incorrect. More seriously, Kieseritzky's compositions, gathered together in Chapter VIII, have been taken on trust. Several of the solutions are cooked in one way or another. There is a mate in six that is in fact a mate in four (p. 246), and so on. I should make it clear that these sorts of errors seem to be confined to just this one chapter. Elsewhere the authors provide some good, original analysis.

Finally, two oddities. There is an index of names, but no bibliography; sources are revealed in the text, or in the 178 footnotes. Secondly, there is only one confirmed likeness of Kieseritzky, in a cartoon on p. 63. Had they found any others, I am sure the authors would have included all of them.

Polish readers are fortunate to have such a fascinating book available to them; they, like me, will certainly enjoy re-sampling it. Sometimes I felt as if I was reading an encyclopedia when all that was really required was a dictionary, so to speak, but that is just a consequence of the authors' anxiety to be thorough and not to leave anything out. They do provide a well-researched picture of Kieseritzky's life and times, and of chess cafe society in Paris of the 1840s in particular. Kieseritzky was a bit of an eccentric, and suffered from nerves, but he was one of the best players of that pre-Morphy era. In other words, at least in his games, this substantial book rightly portrays him as a winner.

[Order](#) *Zagadka Kieseritzky'ego*, by Tomasz Lissowski and Bartłomiej Macieja



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