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about Old  
Chess  
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Jeremy P. Spinrad



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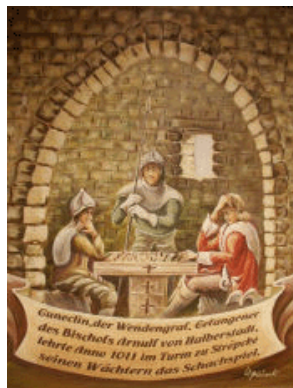
A Small Town in Germany

There is a small town in Germany, named Ströbeck, which is particularly famous for chess. The actual facts about chess in this town are fairly well established; there is little that I can add in this regard. My interest in the town is as a test of reporting. We will see how these known facts about chess in Ströbeck have been reported over the years, always taking an essential truth but twisting it into a barely recognizable form either through carelessness, or to suit the interest of the story.

We start with a quick summary of the facts about Ströbeck, taken primarily from Murray's *A History of Chess*. The first accounts of chess in Ströbeck are from Gustavus Selenius in the early 17th century. Chess was extraordinarily popular in this small town, and some variants of the game survived there long after they became forgotten elsewhere; the strange similarity of the rules to certain forms of chess in Asia are interesting to those who, like Murray, ponder the game's origins. The villagers kept a board (shown above) that was given to them by the King of Prussia in 1651. In 1744, Frederick the Great played chess with a villager of Ströbeck, and in 1823 an endowment was set up to buy chessboards to give as prizes for an annual competition among schoolchildren.



Although the villagers probably were strong players compared to other towns of similar size, accomplished players who visited Ströbeck in the 19th century, including Silberschmidt, Lewis, Bledow, and Lange, found the actual level of chess ability of the villagers to be disappointing; games by each of these masters against local players have been preserved.



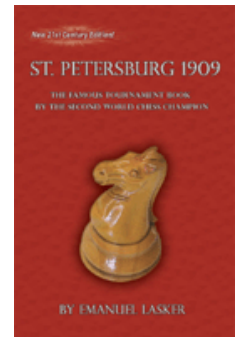
*The Count playing chess*  
Painting: W. Plaisant  
Source: [Schach Museum](#)

The most charming legend of the origin of chess in Ströbeck involves a Count (he is named Count Guzelin in the *Millard County Chronicle* of September 25, 1930, and Gunzelin in the *Washington Post* of September 4, 1927) being imprisoned in Ströbeck for a political crime in the 11th century. He spent the time in prison playing chess, seeing whether his left hand or his right hand was stronger at the game. The peasant guards learned chess by watching him and taught it to their friends; the tower in

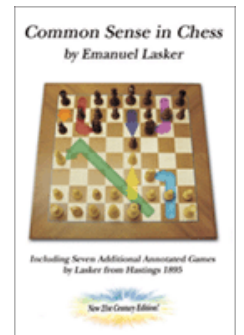
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which the count was said to be imprisoned is one of the tourist attractions of Ströbeck. Unfortunately, “history” does not give us any clue as to the result of the Count’s experiment, to let us know whether we should move pieces with the right or left hand. A version of this story is given in the *New York Times* of May 7, 1931.

According to the *San Juan Record* of March 5, 1936 (the same story appears in the *Vernal Express* of the same day), this legend of the origin of chess in Ströbeck was perpetuated on the town’s chess-inspired paper money. They also tell a story I had not seen elsewhere: that the old German master Silberschmidt visited the town and defeated their champion, winning a large wager proposed by the townsfolk. The townsfolk were willing to pay the money, but unwilling to give Silberschmidt a certificate of defeat, urging the master to take their gold but not their glory. Silberschmidt gave them the money back, to be given to the town and school, only after the villagers signed an oath that they would never gamble on the noble game again. This was supposed to be the end of chess gambling in Ströbeck, which certainly contradicts numerous other stories about the town.

Another version of the origin of chess in Ströbeck is given in the *Workingman’s Advocate*, January 19, 1833. In this version, the villagers were introduced to the game by a dignitary of the Cathedral of Halberstadt. He allowed them an exemption from a tax as long as they were winners of an annual game. They won for a long time, but eventually lost and thus their exemption, but continued to play.

The *Murray Eagle* of November 3, 1927 manages to combine the two legends, with the Bishop of Halberstadt defeating the Count and locking him up in Ströbeck, where he teaches them chess.

An amusing “scientific” and “sociological” note is given in an account of Ströbeck in *Lippincott’s Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, September 1885. After the usual description of the wonderful chess of Ströbeck, the writer adds

“Of course the early development of these small chess-players must have been caused principally by frequent practice and study of the game; but students of psychology might find in it an instance of transmitted tendency and the inherited effect of a certain habit of thought. Such a rustic society as Ströbeck could hardly exist anywhere but Germany. The Italian peasants, who give so much of their time to *loto*, are generally too lazy to make the mental exertion required for chess, while in most other European countries the rural population of the lower class entertain themselves chiefly with fights between dogs, cocks, or men who are little superior to either.”

Errors already start to crop up when reporting the name and location of the town. *Der Humorist*, October 25, 1837, calls the town Strobitz, while the *Montezuma Journal* of July 11, 1902 places the town in Hungary, and the *Free Lance* of May 1, 1890 says Ströbeck is in Russia. At least, these papers managed to locate Ströbeck on the correct continent. By contrast, the *Washington Post* of July 27, 1894 notes that “in the Australian village of Storlech all the inhabitants are chess players, and the game is taught in the public schools.” In addition to the mangling of the town name, I guess that Ströbeck was transferred from Germany to Austria, and then to Australia, by the careful writer of the piece.

One common stretch of the truth is to exaggerate the skill of players in the village. Thus, the *Montezuma Journal* article mentioned above compounds its error on the location of the village by reporting “Hungary has long been famous for her chess players. Indeed, this little village has, as can be well understood, turned out more than one player who has considered fit to rank with such giants as Lasker, Steinitz, or Tchigorin.” *The New York Times*, May 22, 1932, gives a picture of a living chess game in Ströbeck, with the caption “The Little Thuringian Village of

Ströbeck is Noted for Its Chess Champions. The Game is Taught as a Regular Subject in the Public Schools and is Played With Living ‘Pieces’ in the Market Square on Festival Days.” No names are ever given for any of the great champions of the village.

There are many versions of a supposed “marriage law” of Ströbeck. For example, *Lasker’s Chess Magazine*, volume 6, says that no native of the town is allowed to marry a girl from any of the surrounding villages if she is not a first-class chess player, under penalty of a heavy fine. The story on the village website is that it was a 17th-century custom for the groom to “play” for the bride against a selected player, usually the mayor. If he lost, he would pay a fine to the village treasury (in some of the more spectacular versions, they could not marry unless the suitor won). Spectators were only allowed one phrase as an utterance: if their player was making an error, they could call out “Vadder, mit Rat!” (roughly “Father, watch out!”) advising him to play carefully.

The phrase “Vadder, mit Rat” originates from a different story. The Duke of Brunswick (a much earlier Duke than the one who played Morphy) enjoyed festivities of various towns, and sent for a delegation from Ströbeck. The Ströbeck festivity included a chess game involving the mayor, who took along his eight-year-old son. When his father was about to make a bad move, the boy tapped him on the shoulder, using the phrase “Vadder, mit Rat.” After the game, the boy explained the consequences of what would have been his father’s move, and this so impressed the Duke that he made the boy his protégé.

Another interesting feature of reporting on Ströbeck is that the same paper might trot out the story again and again. Thus, a form of the Ströbeck story appears in *der Humorist* on October 25, 1837, and March 29, 1841. The *Manti Messenger* trots out stories on Ströbeck on August 9, 1902, June 15, 1905, and October 5, 1905 before forgetting the story for good.

The *New York Times* of September 7, 1890, reprints a story “A Chess Arcadia” from the *Liverpool Mercury*. Among the little details of life in the town they add that the weathercock on top of the church displays a chess board; I have no idea whether this is true or merely an elaboration of the reporter. Similarly, on page 497 of *Je Sais Tout*, 1905, they say that the chief industry used to be manufacturing chess sets; this seems a bit unusual for such an isolated village, but I suppose it is possible.

My favorite report on Ströbeck is probably true, and I would like to know more about it. It comes from the (Utah) *Times-Independent* of October 6, 1932:

“Leipsic [sic — s/b Leipzig]: Whether or not playing chess affects the formation of the body, and especially that of the skull, is at present being investigated by Dr. R. Grau of the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology, at the University of Leipsic. Doctor Grau is lucky, for he has at his disposal the most unique material for his studies — namely, the entire population of the little village of Stroebeck, province of Saxony, known as the “chess village” where the royal game has been played for close to 1000 years. In Stroebeck chess is played in every house by young and old. Chess even forms part of the obligatory curriculum at the Stroebeck school.”

The same story is given with one extra paragraph in the *Washington Post* of July 24, 1932; this says that the investigation is part of a larger enterprise to investigate the characteristics of the various German tribes, such as Bavarians, Thuringians, Franks and Alemans. I don’t know whether this is at all tied in with Germany’s more infamous racial investigations.

The Ströbeck school has apparently been closed down very recently due to small class size, thus ending a very old tradition of chess in the schools,

though there are appeals to get the school reopened.

A list of old published games with Ströbeck villagers can be found in Murray's *A History of Chess*, page 392. The following game, from the original edition of Bilguer and Lasa's famous *Handbuch*, is one of the games on that list. If this example is typical, it is obvious that chess in Ströbeck is closer to what you might expect in a small village than to world-class play.

Before giving the game itself, we must review the special rules of chess in Ströbeck. First, all games start with the opening moves **1.a4 a5 2.d4 d5 3.h4 h5 4.Qd3 Qd6**. After these initial moves, pawns can move only one square. Castling is prohibited. The strangest rule, however, deals with pawn promotion. The pawn cannot be captured while on the eighth rank. However, before being truly promoted (and it can only become a queen), it must make three separate "joy leaps" to the 6th, 4th, and 2nd ranks; it cannot jump over or capture pieces during its leaps, and it may be captured while on its way back to the second rank. If you want the true Ströbeck experience, the board should have a black rather than a white square on your right.

I note that this is the most normal of three forms of chess played in Ströbeck; for those interested in the other variants (Courier and Old Chess), I refer the reader to Murray.

**Bledow - Ströbeck player**, from *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, 1843 edition, page 365 (notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8): **1.a4 a5 2.d4 d5 3.h4 h5 4.Qd3 Qd6**



The Ströbeck tabiya.

**5.g3 g6 6.Bf4 Qb6 7.Qc3**

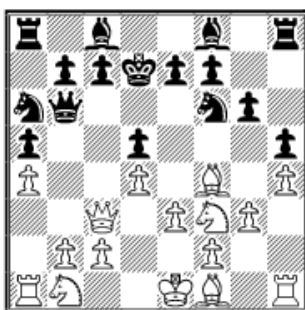


**7...Kd7?**

Definitely not best; as will be seen, this does not really defend the c-pawn, and of course it blocks the QB's development. If Ströbeck rules allowed pawns to advance two squares, Black could have struck a major blow here with 7...e5! 8.Bd2 (if 8.Bxe5?? Bb4 wins the queen) 8...exd4 etc. But with pawns allowed only a one-square advance, best

was probably 7...Nc6.

**8.Nf3 Na6 9.e3 Nf6**



**10.Bd3**

White could have won a pawn here by 10.Bxa6 Rxa6 11.Bxc7! Ne4 (if 11... Qxc7? 12.Ne5+ Kd8 13.Nxf7+ Kd7 14.Nxh8) 12.Bxb6 Nxc3 13.Ne5+ Ke6 14.Bc7 Nxb1 15.Rxb1. Either Bledow did not see it, or perhaps, considering Ströbeck's odd rules of pawn movement and promotion, he considered it not



worth the trouble.

**10...e6 11.Ke2**

Fritz8 does not like this at all, preferring 11.Nd2, but since it thinks castling and two-square pawn moves are permitted, its evaluation can't be taken at face value.

**11...Bd6 12.Ne5+ Ke8 13.Nd2 Bd7 14.Ndf3 Rc8 15.Ng5 Rf8**



Another defensive move that does not really defend, but Black had no good way to save the f-pawn.

**16.Nxf7 Rxf7??**

Relatively best was 16...Ne4. The text simply loses the rook.

**17.Bxg6 Nh7 18.Nxf7 Nf8 19.Bxh5 Ke7**



Walking into a mate in two, but Black was completely lost anyway.

**20.Bg5+ Ke8 21.Nxd6#**