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Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, ChessCafe.com has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

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The [ChessCafe](#) is pleased to present, in two parts, chess historian Harald E. Balló's intriguing essay on Siegbert Tarrasch; translated from the German by John van Manen (Australia) with the help of Ken Whyld (England) and Hanon W. Russell (USA). Balló writes a monthly column on chess history that appears in the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* and maintains a [web-site](#).

Siegbert Tarrasch: Chessplayer, Doctor, German, Jew - Part I

Harald E. Balló

In the life of the chess grandmaster and physician, Siegbert Tarrasch, the whole tragedy of the attempt of Jewish assimilation in Germany becomes clear, even if Tarrasch did not have to die in the gas chambers of Auschwitz or Treblinka. On the basis of ongoing sociological research and work, the following thesis will be set forth and pleaded – that Tarrasch's dogmatic and often hurtful way of expressing his convictions in an exaggerated pedantic method can only be understood when the special place of the Jews in the Empire and in the Weimar Republic are borne in mind. Unlike Emanuel Lasker or Savielly Tartakower, who – as we can definitely assume – must have realized sometime after the end of the First World War (which, just like Tarrasch, they endured on the side of the axis countries Germany and Austria) that an assimilation of the Jewry in Germany was impossible and who, therefore, after 1918, represented the

cosmopolitan Jews from the German culture, Tarrasch reacted as chessplayer with the possibilities given to him by the anti-semitism of the Empire and by the Weimar Republic by an intensified assimilation. Still, in 1933, he completely misunderstood the anti-Jewish legislation that followed the taking of power by the National Socialists. His attitude up to his death was mainly characterized by trying to be a good German citizen and to serve his fatherland.

Tarrasch's dogmatism can quite easily be explained by his struggle for recognition as a Jew among Germans. There is much to say for the notion that Siegbert Tarrasch had an excessive need for public recognition in order to compensate for the feeling of social inferiority of the Jew. Up to now this explanation has not been sufficiently appreciated in historical chess literature. Its application, however, provides a completely new understanding of more recent chess history, with which the name of Tarrasch is closely connected.

Siegbert Tarrasch was born March 5, 1862 in Breslau (Polish Wroclaw) the capital of Silesia. Therefore, when only nine years-old in 1871, Tarrasch lived through the establishment of the German Empire, which was experienced by contemporaries as an epoch-making event. Breslau was the home of the largest Jewish community after Berlin and Hamburg (Jaeckel, Eberhard et al. (Hrsg.), *Enzyklopaedie des Holocaust, Band I*, Argon Verlag, Berlin 1993, S. 240). In particular, the established Jews of Breslau had lived in that town for two or three generations more as Prussians than Jews from other places. First of all because there prevailed in Silesia a Prussian tolerance, under which Jews, Poles, Sorbs, Roman Catholics and Protestants were relatively free within its borders as these were at that time. As a result, the Jews felt a strong bond with this state, which gave them, if not equal rights (in Prussia there was a three-class franchise that was not specifically directed against Jews), at least freedom within their own sphere. Abraham Geiger, a liberal Jewish theologian and for a time rabbi in Breslau, described almost a hundred years earlier the attitude of the German Jews, which was connected with an almost insoluble conflict: "I love Germany, although its public organizations reject me, the Jew; does love require a reason? I feel myself, enveloped in its science, its total practice, and who would with impunity cut the nerve of his existence?" Secondly, the established Jews tried to set themselves apart from the numerous immigrant eastern Jews in Breslau, the cultural center of the East, who were predominantly of proletarian origin. They were careful to stay to themselves in order not to upset the predominantly German character of the Jewish community of Breslau.

In Silesia, which was conquered from the Habsburgs by Frederick II of Prussia in 1741, people were proud of their German citizenship and saw themselves as spearheads against the Slavs of the East. In the center of the market place stood the monument of the honored King of Prussia. Frederick William III had taken up his quarters in Breslau during the war of liberation, had founded there the Iron Cross as a war memorial and prepared there the "Call to my People." That, before anything else, was taught as the history of Breslau to the school children. At excursions, the teachers took them to the battle fields of the Silesian wars; they visited the fortress Silberburg, built by Frederick II, admired the inns in which he had spent his nights and the tree where Frederick's horse had stood... (nach Adolf-Henning Frucht und Joachim Zepelin: *Die Tragik der*

verschmaechten Liebe. Die Geschichte des deutsch-juedischen Physikochemikers und preussischen Patrioten Fritz Haber, in: Mannheimer Forum 94/95, Piper Muenchen 1995).

Tarrasch also belonged to that upper class of the Jews of Breslau, who after the founding of the German Empire were particularly careful to be good citizens. He attended the elite school of Breslau, the Elisabeth-Gymnasium, from which Anderssen also received his education, and passed his final examinations there at Easter, 1880. It becomes clear that Tarrasch, growing up in such an environment, certainly belonged to the Jews in the German Empire of that time, who believed that an assimilation of the Jews in Germany was possible and necessary. In any case, in later years Tarrasch took the trouble to prove time and again his membership in that group, and that he was a good German. Therefore E. von Parish called him in the *Muenchener Neuesten Nachrichten* (Munich Latest News), in view of his achievements at chess, the "Praeceptor Germaniae" (Teacher of Germany).

He gave his eldest son the first name Fritz, after the honored King of Prussia. This can definitely be interpreted as another visible expression of Tarrasch's integration efforts. The latent anti-semitism in the German Empire and the Weimar Republic (not a specifically German phenomenon; see the Dreyfuss affair in France in 1894) led to additional pressure to assimilate. An example of Tarrasch's endeavor to be recognized as a German and of his attitude that gives the impression of being sensitive, occasionally paranoid, in face of the German public, which he again and again assumed to be discriminating against him because of his Jewish origin, is given by the following words spoken on the occasion of his good result at Hamburg 1885 (Tarrasch finished only half-point behind the winner, Gunsberg, sharing second place against very strong opposition): "Without reserve the foreign press acknowledged my result, in particular Zukertort in *Chess Monthly*, and Steinitz in the *International Chess Magazine*... Only the German chess press, in particular Minckwitz in the *Schachzeitung*, wrapped themselves in significant silence." (Tarrasch: *Dreihundert Schachpartien* Veit und Comp., Leipzig 1895, S. 64).

Strikingly, Minckwitz was also editor of the Hamburg 1885 tournament book, published in 1886. Again and again, it becomes clear in the books and articles written by Tarrasch, that he wished nothing more fervently than to be recognized by his fellow citizens as a German. He saw himself completely as the successor to Adolf Anderssen, and it was certainly not an empty phrase, when he wrote: "... on the contrary, I regarded it as obvious that I had to stake my glory gained in Breslau [at the tournament of the 6th Congress of the German Chess League in Breslau 1889 Tarrasch was the winner; H.E.B.] at the next opportunity, just like Anderssen, the chessplayer's ideal, always did" (*Dreihundert Schachpartien*, Veit und Comp., Leipzig 1895, S. 291). And when Tarrasch won the tournament in Manchester in 1890, he stressed how pleased he was to have fulfilled the heart's desire of many German chessplayers (Ders., a.a.O., S. 295).

The psychological position in which Tarrasch and many of his contemporary

Jews found themselves, was also that of a human being, who had to always prove that he, the Jew, belonged among them. For that reason he could not get enough recognition. And even when the long-famous “Augustea” of Leipzig, the time-honored chess club of Saxony, sent him a cable after his success in Manchester 1890: “The Augustea congratulates the foremost German master,” he perceived it as discriminating, that in Germany he was only seen as the foremost master in Germany, and not – as in foreign magazines – already as World Champion (Ders., a.a.O., S. 295). He wanted not to be the leading German, but he wanted to be World Champion for Germany!

From his first marriage Tarrasch had five children, three sons and two daughters. Within a short period, 1914-1918, his three sons died. The eldest son, Dr. Phil. Fritz Tarrasch, was killed on May 14, 1915, as lieutenant in the 15th Bavarian reserve infantry regiment in the First World War. Tarrasch’s second son committed suicide, while the third son died when run over by a tram in Munich in 1916. What a strong personality Tarrasch must have had and how far his need must have been for admission and recognition by the German public, becomes clear from the defiant encouraging lines, which he wrote in the autumn 1916 in spite of these heavy personal losses: “And secondly we note that notwithstanding all the terror of the World War, this distracts us so little, that our appreciation of mental pleasures is completely normal, and that, just as for other art, we still maintain a keen interest in the art of chess. The saying *inter arma silent musae* (in war Muses are silent) has no validity with us. We are even doing well!” (*Der Schachwettkampf Tarrasch-Mieses im Herbst 1916*. Veit und Comp., Leipzig 1916, S. 7). Nevertheless, these great misfortunes and personal losses within a few years certainly could have been the main reason that he lost his match with Emanuel Lasker in November/December of the same year by the clear score of 5½-½.

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