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From the Archives

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Mark Donlan



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 2

Harald Balló

After the divorce from his first wife Rosa Anna Tarrasch in 1924, Tarrasch married a second time and lived in Munich. In 1932 he published his own chess magazine. In the December, 1932 issue he wrote: “Can chess not finally become the national game of Germany? And what further prospects would present themselves then? What advance of the general cultural level, even moral, if the chess board replaced the card table! A real goal, worthy of the sweat of noble people!” Again a clear declaration.

Early in 1933 the Nazis managed to install Adolf Hitler as the Reichs Chancellor in the government, although at the last free election he had not been elected by the majority of the German population. To introduce their anti-Semitic demands, it had set forth in the party program of February, 1920, the

first legislative measures. The “Law to reintroduce the Professional Civil Service” of April 7, 1933, decreed that all non-Aryan civil servants had to be dismissed. Those, who already were officials as of August 1, 1914, who had fought at the front in the First World War for Germany or its allies or who were officials, whose father or sons were killed in that war, were excepted. A non-Aryan was everyone who descended from Jewish parents.

In the chess world, the introduction of anti-Semitic regulations followed the founding of the Greater German Chess League. “The Greater German Chess League has been established December 13, 1931. Its seat is Berlin...it...takes...as members only Germans of Aryan descent.” The German Chess League was finally – after its longstanding leadership resigned on July 9, 1933 on the occasion of a combined top meeting in Bad Pyrmont – more or less by force, amalgamated with the Greater German one. What did Tarrasch feel, when in the August, 1933 issue of his own chess magazine with reference to the Greater German Chess League and its new regulations, he had to write: “The Aryan paragraph has to be kept?” (*Tarraschs Schachzeitung*, 1933, S. 334). Tarrasch still had been silent about his Jewish descent (which, however, everybody knew about).

At the start of 1933 the position and place of Jews in Germany was by no means clear and unequivocal, in spite of these first clearly anti-Semitic measures of the National Socialists. And nobody in the population, whether on one (German) or the other (Jewish) side could have realized the deadly consistency with which the Nazis would proceed. And certainly not a Jew, who like Tarrasch, was concerned about assimilation and Germanization. It seems almost tragi-comic, how from the “German” side Hermann Ranneforth, the longstanding publisher of the *Schach-Kalender* and completely nationalistically oriented, in view of the evident ambiguity and the mutually logically contradicting ways of thinking of the National Socialists (here evident service of Jewish fellow citizens to the German life, but there anti-Semitic laws incorporating their racial segregation) delivered an intellectual tight-rope act without equal. Thus, on one hand he wrote in May 1933: “In comparison, Jewish members were always strongly represented in the chess clubs, and great international masters also emerged, who made the fame of German chess art known in the world,” but to write on the other hand in the next sentence: “That will probably stop now.” On one hand he wrote: “Meanwhile Jewish fellow members voluntarily left all leading positions,” as if these resigned from their offices voluntarily and without coercion, then to continue in the same breath, that Jewish office holders “could be certain no objections could be made against their persons, their way of thinking, and their management.” (*Deutsche Schachzeitung* Mai 1933, S. 134 ff.).

Finally, in his contribution to the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* in May, 1933, quoted here, Ranneforth appears to be certain that life would go on for Jewish citizens in Germany, but with it he here also expressed an opinion irrational for chess players: “Whoever feels and acts like a German and therefore feels internally connected with the German people, why should we not accept him as a fellow compatriot?” Tarrasch certainly also still believed in such a possibility of living together. Nothing indicates that he wanted to leave Germany. Undoubtedly he

would have had the possibility to do so in view of his connections. For the time being he had of course nothing to fear, as he fell into the group of Jews whose nearest relations had fought at the front in the First World War.

Perhaps he had a presentiment of evil, but nevertheless he, a German patriot of Jewish descent from Breslau, could not believe that Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich had already planned a long time ago the murder of the European Jews. In a note to a contribution by the veterinary surgeon, Dr. Kiok of Magdeburg, who for a time ran the business of the German Chess League, stating that "Chess, due to its high mental and cultural significance, could be made the national game of the united German people," Tarrasch refers in April 1933 (*Tarraschs Schachzeitung* 1933, S. 223), almost imploring appealingly, to his own article in December, 1932, in which he had already advocated exactly the same idea ("Could Chess not finally become the national game of the German people?"). Therefore, as if he wanted to call himself and the others "Aryan" Germans, once more: "Look, I belong among You, don't I? We want all the same, don't we?"

Another two years would still pass, until Sunday the 15th of September 1935, before laws were passed at Nuremberg under which the German Jews lost their political rights. The previous exceptions, applying to veterans of the First World War, and to civil servants, who had taken their jobs before 1914, were also cancelled. Tarrasch fortunately did not live to see this happen. He died February 17, 1934.

Ranneforth published an obituary in the *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, in which yet again the strangely split attitude of that time with regard to Jews found expression, and in which Ranneforth broke the law of "Nihil nisi bene" (nothing but good...), as everybody certainly would agree. Here the appreciation of the great chess player Tarrasch, there the almost obligatory need to discover in the deceased characteristic weaknesses from the point of view of the Nazi-ideology. "In the early hours of 17 February, shortly before the end of his 72nd year of life, Dr. Siegbert Tarrasch died...Friends...and some representatives of chess clubs in Munich attended the funeral service; the clergy was absent...This was the man, who, after Anderssen's death, enhanced again and increased Germany's chess reputation in the entire world to an undreamed-of high level and who by his literary work became the teacher of all, who played a role in international tournaments, even if they in due course went their own way...Intolerant and quite often unjust to critics, who did not permit him to silence them, but was himself a touchy person." (*Deutsche Schachzeitung* März 1934, S. 66 ff.). Ranneforth, although appreciating quite well Tarrasch's efforts on behalf of chess in Germany, still did not understand that Tarrasch during his life wanted to be German like the Germans.

Tarrasch's road to assimilation and his strategy to withdraw from reverses and repeated disappointments by especially and conspicuously "being German" (as if anti-Semitism was something rational, which could be refuted by clear explanation) led – in a socio-political retrospective view – not to a solution. However, it almost certainly led to Tarrasch becoming – in the current view –

the “Praeceptor Mundi” (teacher of the world) of chess, more so than Nimzovitch, Réti, Lasker or Steinitz ever could be. In the form of dogmatic rules, which he formulated for the whole world, he sublimated his need to be a German among the Germans (not a Jew among the Germans). Fritz Haber, the founder of the Haber-Bosch procedure for ammonia synthesis, developer and organizer of the chemical war in the First World War, and inventor of the method to combat pests by using Prussic acid gas, was also a Jew from Breslau, belonging to the same generation as Tarrasch, and passed his final exams at the same gymnasium as he. About Fritz Haber, Albert Einstein wrote something that could be equally applicable to Tarrasch: “It was the tragedy of the German Jews, the tragedy of scorned love.”

Siegbert Tarrasch was a German Jew, just as Wilhelm Steinitz was a Jew who grew up in the German culture sphere, to whom the chess world is much indebted! The persecution and murder of the European Jews, guided by the National Socialists and racists in Germany and elsewhere, can not dispute the fact of German-Jewish culture of that time. That was then certainly the second war aim of the Second World War that Adolf Hitler still could achieve. The complex connections of German Jewish history, not just in Silesia, deserve to be saved from oblivion for the sake of chess. From today’s viewpoint, chess history shows clearly that the development of “modern chess”, starting in 1851 with Adolf Anderssen, can not adequately be described without mentioning the achievements of the German Jews Wilhelm Steinitz, Siegbert Tarrasch and Emanuel Lasker, in its at least until 1945 Central European, and with that principally as German characterized, context.

This people can surely see now, in May 1996, 51 years after the capitulation of Nazi Germany. And Siegbert Tarrasch from Breslau, truly “Praeceptor Mundi” of chess, would surely also have seen it that way.

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