



COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

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A Chess Tourist in Venice

According to the [ChessCafe.com Archives](#) – one of the crutches of my deficient memory – it was eight years ago when I first noticed the chess club at the newspaper stall near the Accademia boat stop in Venice. The word ‘club’ may be too grandiose to describe it. There was one little table at the back of the stall, a chair for one of the players and a pile of newspapers for his opponent to sit on. The others had to wait for their turn, according to the principle ‘winner stays.’

A small club, but a nice one. I kept visiting it whenever I was in Venice, most recently a few weeks ago, after four years absence.

Some things had changed. Because the Accademia gallery is being renovated, we had less space and were a bit cramped between the people who hurried to and from the boats, but of course we hardly noticed this during play.

There was a new owner of the stall, who turned out to be a younger brother of his predecessor. Luckily he loved chess too, though he seemed less absorbed by the game than his older brother, who used to turn his stall into a self-service shop when he was playing chess. ‘Just put the money down’ he cried, and I had been impressed by the fact that he knew the prices of all his papers, books and calendars by heart and could tell them in four languages.

This liberal practice may have cost him some money. Anyway, the younger brother didn’t chance upon the customers’ honesty anymore and stopped the clocks when he had to attend to business.

There were also things that had remained unchanged, one being the reaction of the owner of the stall when I asked about real chess clubs in Venice. Just like his brother he answered with a stern face that the real club was here, where we were standing. The other clubs were fake, he said. Nevertheless he was willing to draw two circles on a map to indicate the location of the Circolo Carlo Salvioli and the Circolo Esteban Canal, the two most prominent chess clubs of the city.

The club named after Esteban Canal is at Campo Saffa, not far from the apartment that I had rented. It is located in two empty shops opposite each other. Not quite on the level of the splendid palazzos in which the great Venetian tournaments used to be played, but on the other hand, by no means could this club be called a fake.

It had a small library and a cupboard with trophies, on the walls there were photos of world champions and Venetian tournaments, and people were playing blitz.



Antonio Rosino
Photo: [Ken Whyld Association](#)

Among them was Antonio Rosino, whom I had visited earlier that day at his apartment, which by accident was in the same street as my temporary lodging. Call it a chessplayer's intuition if you want.

Antonio is a Fide master, a teacher and organiser of chess, but mainly known as a chess historian. Together with Andriano Chicco he has written a standard work of 639 pages about the history of Italian chess, *Storia degli scacchi in Italia*.

Long ago he had given me this book as a present, saying that it would be nice if I could review it in *New in Chess*. 'But I don't know Italian', I protested. 'You will be able to read it easily', he had said, the flatterer. This wasn't true, but I have often used the book as a reference work.

At his house he had entertained me telling stories and showing pictures about Italian chess history, often digressing on vaguely related subjects such as the emperor Tiberius, Dante or the Venetian resistance to the German occupation during the last years of World War II.

One of the subjects we came to speak of was Hein Donner's victory in the tournament in 1967, played at the Venice casino in the rooms where Richard Wagner had died in 1883. This detail about Wagner's death I had not known, but of course Antonio did know it.

At the time this victory caused quite a stir in Dutch chess circles, not only because Donner had finished ahead of then world champion Tigran Petrosian, but also because of what happened afterwards.

A few days after the tournament Donner was on Dutch TV, talking about his great success, but also seizing the opportunity to make a political statement. He said that apart from his prize money he had received a splendid trophy, a golden gondola studded with diamonds. What to do with such a valuable object? On TV Donner announced that he would donate it to the Vietcong, so that they could sell it and buy medicines or, if they preferred so, weapons for their struggle against the U.S. in Vietnam.

For this statement Donner was fired, on the same evening, as a chess columnist of the staunchly pro-American Dutch weekly *Elseviers Weekblad*. Repercussions by another paper for which he wrote were considered, but could be avoided. Under the harsh political climate of our days, he might have been prosecuted for aiding a terrorist organisation.

A few years ago this story was brought up again in *New in Chess* by Genna Sosonko, who gave it an interesting twist, no doubt on authority of Donner himself: the Venice municipality, that had donated the trophy, had never actually sent it to Donner.

Later the matter was put right by Antonio Rosino in a letter to *New in Chess*. The gorgeous trophy of gold and diamonds had never existed. What Donner had actually received, at the award ceremony, was just a little golden ornament with a few gems, representing the two night lamps of a gondola. The same prize had been given to Boris Ivkov one year earlier.

What did actually happen to Donner's gondola? The Vietcong never got it, that is certain. In his letter Antonio wrote that after the awards the players were brought by motor boat to their hotel near the San Marco Square. It was a day of high water. Antonio went out of the boat in his boots to get some help from the hotel, but Donner wasn't going to wait for that. 'He removed his shoes and came with me, cup and shoes in his hands, jumping into the water. This was the last time I saw him.'

When we were talking about this story Antonio said that of course Sosonko was not to blame for his false version. 'We all know Donner's stories, don't we? They could be quite convincing.'

This gave me the opportunity to check another Donner story, which I had never quite believed. Eugenio Szabados (1898-1974) was a great man both in Venetian and Italian chess. Himself a player of master strength, he was also an organiser and patron of many fine chess events. From 1950 till 1958 he was president of the Italian chess federation. He was rich, being the owner of many ships, among other things.

In 1956 there was the so-called Suez crisis, when the Suez Canal was closed off by the Egyptian president Nasser, who wanted to nationalise it.

As Donner told the story, almost all of Szabados' ships were inside the canal at that time. According to Donner, they were confiscated. Szabados had not insured his ships, because for an owner of a big fleet insurance is usually senseless. Once in a while you lose a ship, but insurance for the whole fleet would be much more costly.

So, still according to Donner, in 1956 Szabados lost all his ships and his whole fortune and was a poor man afterwards.

Antonio was listening to my story and when I had finished he said: 'This is completely true, from the beginning to the end.' So, once again I experienced the unreliability of Hein Donner as a story teller. He could be right when you least expected it.

When I had told Antonio that I had got the location of his club from the people at the newspaper stall, his face had darkened. 'They do not speak well of us there,' he said. This was certainly true. Later he told me about some quarrels between his club and the people of the Accademia newspaper stall in which the latter group had certainly not behaved like gentleman.

So you see once again that when you come closer to a small and closely-knit society, you'll always find trouble and strife. But I didn't have to take sides. I had enjoyed myself at the Accademia newspaper stall and at the Esteban Canal club and I loved them all.

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