



COLUMNISTS

Past Pieces

Olimpiu G. Urcan



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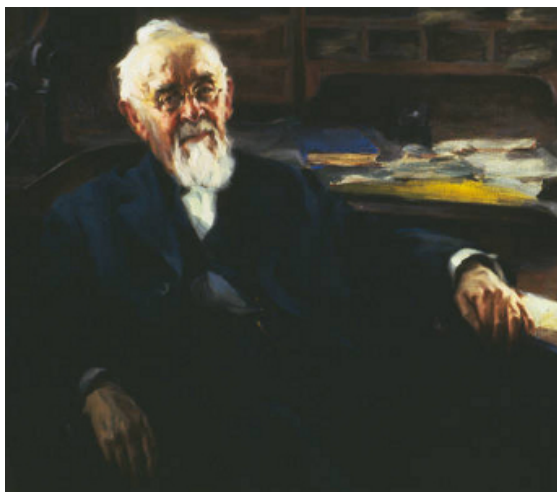
Librarians often labor to help authors find what they need. This month we talk with Lissa Waite, Librarian with the Cleveland Public Library, Chess & Checkers Special Collection.

Interview with Lissa Waite

Among the most valuable sections of the Fine Arts & Special Collections Department of the [Cleveland Public Library](#) is the John G. White Chess & Checkers Collection. According to the libraries information [page](#), it is the largest and most comprehensive chess library in the world. The collection was officially established in 1928 and the many librarians who worked with it have proved to be of invaluable help to researchers and authors. At the start of December 2009 we conducted a brief interview with Lissa Waite, one of the most enthusiastic librarians currently working with the chess collection at the library.

Olimpiu G. Urcan: Welcome to ChessCafe.com. There are only a few extensive chess collections in libraries worldwide. For the less initiated readers, who was John G. White and how did his collection become the property of the Cleveland Public Library?

Lissa Waite: John G. White was a remarkable man who accomplished much in his life. He was an attorney who was also very active in the Cleveland community. He served on the Board of Trustees for the Cleveland Public Library, and was President of the Board when the beautiful downtown building was built (opening in 1925). He was also a collector. He started buying chess books in 1870 "en bloc" and then selling those that turned out to duplicate what he already owned. Soon, however, he was buying chess material title-by-title, compiling his own desiderata lists, and working with agents in all the large book markets. White never married and was the last survivor of his family.



John G. White (1845-1928), two years before his demise,
in a painting by Sandor Vago. [Courtesy of the Cleveland Public Library]

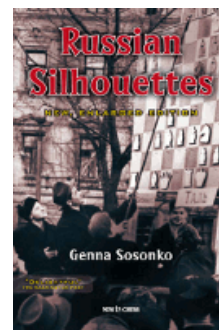
He left his chess and checker collection to Cleveland Public Library when he died in 1928, as well as an endowment to continue adding to the collection. Mr. White also donated two other substantial collections to the Library: Folklore and Orientalia (material relating to the Far and Middle East). All of this material is housed in the Special Collections Department in a lovely room built with funds donated by White. His interest in chess apparently started when he was a boy. He and his father would take daily walks. One day only Latin would be spoken, another day, only Greek. "Chess days" they played

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[Botvinnik-Smyslov,
1954, 1957, 1958](#)

by Mikhail Botvinnik



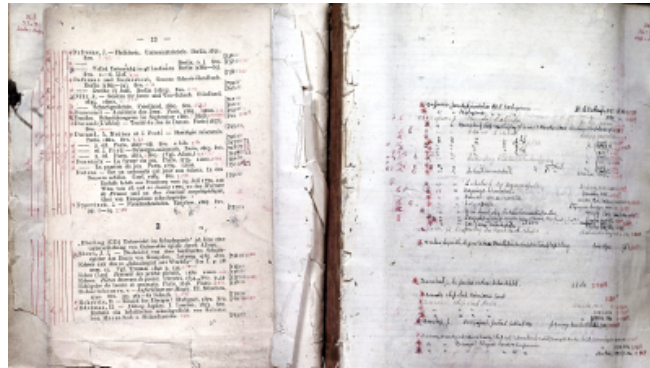
[Russian Silhouettes](#)
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[Botvinnik-Bronstein,
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from memory without chess board or men. He never considered himself a player of any notable skill, but became fascinated with the history and dissemination of the game.



[\[Click here to enlarge image.\]](#)

The image above is one of the double pages annotated by John G. White of his own bibliography of chess and checkers material. The left hand side is a page from van der Linde's *Erste Jartausend* (1881) pasted onto a blank page of a journal. On the opposite side is White's list of titles not included in der Linde's list. The red columns to the left each represent a different collection; the presence of a book in that collection is marked by a star. This is one of many volumes annotated by Mr. White as he worked on identifying, purchasing and cataloging his collection.

OGU: What makes the John G. White Chess Collection special in comparison with other chess collections from the Netherlands, England, or Germany?

LW: There are a couple of things that make the John G. White collection unique in the chess world. The first is that it belongs to a public library, not a university or private library. All the material is available to anyone who wants to use it. One of the special aspects of the collection is the chess periodicals. A search of the catalog brings up almost 900 titles; there are at least a few hundred more titles that do not yet appear in the catalog. We have been working the past couple of years to upgrade and improve these catalog records so that chess researchers can more easily find this information. The White Collection also contains many one-of-a-kind items such as early manuscripts about chess, letters, photographs, and collections of papers from various chess players.

OGU: What is the average number of visitors per month for the chess collection?

LW: We average about ten visits a month with people who are looking for information about chess or who bring a board and sit and study moves using books in the collection. A few times a year we get researchers from around the world who come to Cleveland and stay for a few days or a week to use the collection. (This makes it sound like we're not very busy, but we also have patrons using other material that is part of Special Collections. Unfortunately we do not have staff dedicated solely to the chess and checkers collection.) In addition to people who actually come to Cleveland, we frequently correspond with researches or players by email. We can scan most of the material (some is too fragile) and often send information electronically.

OGU: Is the library organizing any special events to promote or to raise awareness about this special collection? Any interesting projects in the recent past or near future?

LW: The staff is working on an exhibit "Women in Chess," which will be installed in March or April. We currently have all women working in Special Collections, so this is an area of interest to us! We recently had an exhibit of some of the more than 1,200 versions of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat that we own. This poem, originally published in Persia around the early telfth century, was translated into English in 1859. One of the verses refers to chess (or checkers depending on the translation). Mr. White collected literature relating to chess, so Cleveland Public Library has one of the largest Rubaiyat

collections, with many beautifully illustrated editions; 2009 was the 150th anniversary of the first translation.



[\[Click here to enlarge image.\]](#)

The image above is one of a few sheets that were recently found on the shelf, with no record in the catalog. A record has now been created for these clippings published in Nazi Germany in 1939.

An index included with the column states, "The circulation of the *Judisches Nachrichtenblatt* having been restricted to the Jewish community inside of Germany, copies of this newspaper are practically unobtainable outside of Germany. Sets of the chess column of this newspaper, therefore, must be considered as one of the great rarities of chess literature." It is not known who created the index or wrote this comment.

It appears from Worldcat that some other libraries may own the newspaper, but it seems that Cleveland is the only library that has the chess columns collected together.

OGU: Who are the people behind the scenes there? Who's who in your staff?

LW: Special Collections is part of the Fine Arts and Special Collections Department, which is managed by Pamela Eyerdam. Currently there are five staff members who work with all areas of the collection. Rhonda Green and Magaly Lannum are clerks who process all the material and do the scanning and copying when patrons request information. There are three librarians: Amy Dawson, Lissa Waite, and Oksana Kraus. We have our own areas of "expertise" in the department, but we all regularly assist people in all subject areas that are in the collection. Everyone who works here thinks this is "the best job in the world!"

OGU: Is there any specific collaboration on such projects with other libraries (with chess content)?

LW: We do not have any collaboration with other libraries at the current time, and I'm not aware of any in the past, although there may have been.

OGU: Is the library funded by public money or there are private funds as well?

LW: Material purchased for the chess collection is funded by income from the endowment left by John G. White; many other people have made, and continue to make, generous donations of books, letters, and personal papers, chess sets, and other chess-related material that greatly enrich and strengthen the collection. Cleveland Public Library, which is supported by public money, provides the funding for staff, preservation and storage costs, and all other expenses related to the maintenance of the collection.

OGU: Will we be able to see items digitized online in the near future (subscription-based or else)?

LW: It has long been our hope to be able to digitize some of the items in the collection. Funding and limited staffing have prevented any real progress. We have undertaken a small project of digitizing some of the pictures in the chess and checkers photograph collection. These can be viewed at this [webpage](#).

We are currently working on an inventory of all the chess sets at the Library; they will all be photographed, and those images will be available online as well within the next six months or so.

OGU: You are a Ken Whyld Association member. Does it help the chess collection?

LW: Being a member of [KWA](#) is very helpful to us as we look for material to purchase for the collection. We try to buy every book published by KWA members. Sometimes, because of the way the acquisitions process works at the Library, we cannot buy an item, but it is always informative and helpful to read through the website on a regular basis to keep abreast with what's going on in the world of chess researchers. I would hope that having Cleveland Public Library as a member would encourage KWA members to contact us if they need assistance finding material that we might have in the collection.

OGU: What do you make of the relationship between the specialized librarian and the chess historian working on specific projects/books?

LW: Working with chess researchers is one of the favorite parts of my job. Most researchers know exactly what they're looking for when they come to Cleveland or when they contact us by email. However, while every effort is made to make sure the online catalog is complete and useful for library users, we continue to find chess items that either have never been added to the online catalog or that have such a brief record that they are not easily found. (As I mentioned, we work closely with the Catalog Department to upgrade the catalog when we find this material.) So occasionally we can be of assistance to researchers if we know what they're working on and can identify material that might be helpful to them. It often feels like doing a puzzle - finding the right pieces that will make the story more complete. Unfortunately, we can usually only devote a couple of hours of research for each patron because of limited time, but everyone on the staff is always happy when we can find an obscure chess column or collection of letters that might prove useful.

OGU: Indeed so. Thank you for taking time with this brief interview and we wish you and the CPL staff happy season holidays.

LW: My pleasure. Thank you and we wish the same to [ChessCafe.com](#) readers.

We end this December column with an endgame composition by Karl Kondelik that appeared in *The Chess World* [May 1893, Vol. 1, No. 5, page 70]:



**White to play and draw
(answer next month)**

Interested readers, authors, collectors, researchers, or librarians are encouraged to [contact the author](#).

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