



C O L U M N I S T S

From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online many 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.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the **ChessCafe** home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

The following is an excerpt from an unpublished manuscript by Hans Kmoch (1894-1973). Kmoch’s career as a player, journalist, and arbiter brought him into contact with some of the greatest players of all time. We extend our thanks to Burt Hochberg, who owns the manuscript, for allowing us to publish this excerpt, which he has edited especially for the **ChessCafe**.

Grandmasters I Have Known

by Hans Kmoch

Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine, “doctor juris” (1892-1946)

In 1971, amid the excitement over Bobby Fischer’s assault on Boris Spassky, there was cause to remember one of the greatest figures in all of chess history. Alekhine, who had died twenty-five years earlier while still holding the title of world champion.

Some time ago I wrote an article about Alekhine called “Alekhine and His Luck.” Since he was a contemporary of mine whom I had known well for many years, I felt I could avoid the usual presentation of him as a great chess genius and paragon of virtue. Instead, I wrote about his personality and about my own experiences with him, which meant showing him to be, among other things, an alcoholic, a political opportunist, and an anti-Semite in the Nazi style.

When my article appeared in the *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, a Berlin chess magazine, it met with considerable disparagement on the part of some ardent Aryans. One German professor insisted that he had never seen Alekhine drunk and that therefore Alekhine could not have been an alcoholic. Another German professor explained everything by pointing out my own inferiority. A man who used to belong to an Aryans-only chess club in Vienna condemned my article as irreconcilable with the fact that I had once held the position of Alekhine's second. A famous non-German musician, employed in the United States, expressed his contempt both for me and for the publisher of my article.

The present article is, by and large, an English version of that article. There are two details I want to add. One is the way I spell his name here "Alekhine" became the only correct spelling in the Latin alphabet when its bearer took French citizenship. I should also point out that Alekhine obtained his doctorate, to use his own words, "in the regular way, not just 'honoris causa', like Emanuel Lasker." Alekhine never practiced law, however, nor did he ever sign his name "Dr." [Footnote 1: According to records in the Hanon W. Russell archives, Alekhine never completed his doctoral studies and thus did not actually receive his doctorate. Although Kmoch may never have seen Alekhine use "Dr." with his signature, there are many examples of the "Dr." signature in the Russell archives. B.H.]

Alekhine's savior was his third wife, Nadasha (or Natasha), whom he married in Paris, where they both lived, in 1925, shortly before the tournament that year in Baden-Baden. Like Alekhine, Nadasha came from a wealthy Russian family and was well educated. In addition to Russian, she spoke German, French, and English, and knew everything about etiquette. She always acted decently and displayed exquisite taste in matters of art.

In appearance, however, this perfect lady was perfectly ridiculous, always conspicuously dressed and loaded down with costume jewelry. Once when the Alekhines' were staying in Vienna, my hometown, and my wife had taken Nadasha out to tea a few times, I heard waiters in the cafe refer to her among themselves as "the Christmas tree." Adding to the strange impression she made was her posture, which suggested an imminent family event a possibility that her wrinkled face irrefutably denied. When at Baden-Baden the rumor spread that Madame Alekhine had previously been widowed first by a general and then by an admiral, Grünfeld estimated that her age must have been somewhere between seventy and eighty. "It takes time to become a general or an admiral," he reasoned, apparently assuming that she had married two cadets.

Nadasha's motherly care and moral guidance nurtured her "Shura" to the world championship in 1927 and to the pinnacle of a fantastic tournament career with first prizes at San Remo 1930 and Bled 1931.

At Bled, Alekhine's superiority drove the proud Nimzovich to despair. When he resigned to the world champion after only nineteen moves he was near tears. "It's incredible," he complained. "Only a few years ago we were all about equal," he said, referring to the chess elite of that time, "but now he treats us

like patzers.”

It was also at Bled that Alekhine started to indulge openly in unrestrained drinking. One day, when he joined our wives and me at afternoon tea, his behavior was erratic and he had difficulty speaking. When he snuffed out his cigarette in my wife’s cake, Nadasha rose and led him away. Returning alone after a few minutes, she said to my wife, in grammatically broken German, “Excuse me, dear. Alekhine – Russian pig. Now sleeping like child.”

At the closing ceremony of that tournament, Kostic, that inveterate enfant terrible, caused some further painful embarrassment by calling from his end of the table to the other end, where the world champion was sitting next to a few high officials, “Herr Alekhine!” he always called him “Herr.” “What was it that made you so drunk yesterday, cognac or klekovaca?” (Klekovaca is the Slovene equivalent of gin.) Alekhine mumbled some denial, but Kostic persisted. “Of course you were drunk! How else could I have beaten you seven to one? I’m very good at skittles, that’s true but seven to one is too much!”

Sometime earlier I had had an experience of my own with respect to Alekhine’s drinking. On the Riviera, where my wife and I were vacationing shortly after the San Remo tournament, we happened to meet Alekhine. He was alone, and the lack of Nadasha’s care was grotesquely apparent. He was unshaved and sloppily dressed, ate his breakfast of hard-boiled eggs with dirty bare hands, and washed down his food with gulps of vermouth. On another day, when his breakfast consisted of cold cuts and a bottle of champagne, he hardly touched his food but emptied the bottle quickly.

One night when I was out dancing with my wife, Alekhine entered the place just as the band was beginning a Viennese waltz. Alekhine never danced, but on this occasion, though for obvious reasons he was unsteady on his feet, he asked my wife to join him in the waltz. The result was that they both had to be helped up from the floor. We left immediately and I took Alekhine home. There was a moment of anxiety when the world champion, in the process of entering the taxi, almost propelled himself out the other side. [Footnote 2: Readers familiar with Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *The Defense* will recall a crucial scene in which Luzhin, Nabokov’s chess grandmaster, falls out of a taxi in precisely this way. B.H.]

Sometime between Bled 1931 and his 1934 match against Bogolybov, Shura dropped Nadasha. A fourth wife undertook to carry Alekhine’s luck, but she bore him to his doom. Madame Number Four was an American, also of advanced age, in appearance more a barren trunk than a Christmas tree. She lived in France, where she owned an old castle as well as some land suitable, according to Alekhine, for raising sheep. (When I asked him how many sheep they had, he admitted that there were only two “but two is enough, as Adam and Eve proved.”) When she was younger, Madame had been a very skillful painter of miniatures, but while married to Alekhine she no longer pursued that hobby.

Unfortunately, Madame Number Four liked liquor as much as her husband did.

Both were drinking heavily during Alekhine's 1934 match against Bogolyubov, which was played in several cities in Europe. I acted as Alekhine's second (which today means being almost a partner, but in those days was hardly more than a formality). One day in Munich Alekhine invited me to his room, where Mrs. Alekhine played hostess. She opened a large trunk, which, to my amazement, contained nothing but liquor bottles – a traveling bar. I had a feeling of foreboding for the man whose chess genius I so greatly admired.

A major scandal occurred when the three games at Munich were finished and the whole chess troupe was about to leave for Bayreuth, where the next game was scheduled. The special cars for the trip and all the passengers had been ready for a long time, but the Alekhines' kept them waiting. Eventually, Madame appeared alone in the hotel lobby, very drunk, and shouting, "We won't play! We won't play!"

The organizers finally succeeded somehow in loading both Alekhines' into one of the cars. The trip took all night, and although the next game started ten or twelve hours later, Alekhine won.

It is incredible how long Alekhine remained on top despite his pernicious addiction to alcohol. Euwe's victory in their 1935 match for the world championship must not be underestimated, especially because for exactly half the match Alekhine totally abstained from alcohol. But neither should Alekhine's recovery of the title in 1937 be overrated, since in that match Euwe was the victim of public opinion in his native Holland that favored him so strongly that even his sober mathematical mind was muddled by over-optimism.

Alekhine's powers started to wane in 1935, and although he avoided alcohol completely for the next five years the years of the great tournaments at Nottingham 1936, Kemerli 1937, and AVRO 1938 his decline continued. He was still great, but he was no longer unique.

Alekhine's views on many subjects changed often over the years, probably due in part to the effects of alcohol. During the 1934 match with Bogolyubov, Sportführer von Tschammer und Osten, a leading Nazi, invited the entire chess troupe to a banquet, where Alekhine was a guest speaker. During his speech, which he gave in German, he referred to the leaders of the Soviet Union by saying, "Die Schufte müssen verschwinden" (these scoundrels must disappear). But Alekhine soon sought the favors of these "scoundrels."

Thanks to Euwe's victory in the world championship, there was a chess boom in Holland after 1935, and during important chess events Russian chess editors called daily from Moscow to ask (usually me) for the latest news. When Alekhine found out about this, he became very eager to receive one of these calls himself. Reports by Flohr and Fine, and probably some other "explorers" of the Soviet Union, had convinced him that a chess tour in the country of his birth might be very profitable. He could earn as many rubles as he wished and convert them into jewelry, and in that way take his earnings out of Russia to his new homeland, France. He was fishing for an invitation to the Soviet Union.

After the 1939 Olympiad in Buenos Aires, Alekhine sent me a friendly card from France. It was the last message I ever received from him. The war in the West started, France collapsed, and Alekhine, who was serving as a sanitation officer in the French army, landed in Toulon. There he met an old friend of mine, an antiques dealer from Vienna, and together they made plans for a dash for freedom across the Pyrenees. But on the crucial day Alekhine changed his mind and returned to Paris, where he surrendered to the Germans. My friend fled alone and eventually reached New York with one dollar in his pocket. He became a well-to-do American citizen, a dealer in antiquities. For many years he was an ardent chess player at the Manhattan Chess Club. Walter Ephron was his name. He died in New York in 1972, at the age of seventy-seven.

The German victories in Russia apparently changed Alekhine. On his return to Paris he returned also to the bottle. Then he suddenly attacked the Jews in a series of articles for *Die Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden*, a Nazi newspaper published in occupied Holland. Under the headline “Aryan and Jewish Chess,” he pointed out that many players whom the chess world had up to that time considered the greatest of masters were in fact, since they were Jews, rather mediocre. The Jew Reuben Fine would not be the next world champion, he now asserted, contrary to his own prediction before the war. Referring to the match he had lost to Euwe in 1935, he attributed his defeat to the religion of my wife “Referee Kmoch,” he wrote, “has a Jewish wife, so one can imagine how objective he was.”

Such nonsense was normally unfit to print, but given the conditions in Europe at that time it was threatening in the extreme. Under the watchful eye of the Gestapo, such statements could mean death for the attacked Jew and even for his or her non-Jewish spouse. Since my wife and I were already in constant fear that she might be deported, Alekhine’s accusation was very frightening.

Much later, some noble whitewashers, people of the same category as the above-mentioned German professors, explained that Alekhine had been forced to write those infamous articles. But that is simply a variant of the story of the drunkard who befouls his pants and then wonders who might have done it.

While reading those articles, I remembered that Alekhine used to get angry if his name was pronounced Al-YOH-khin, the way Russians sometimes pronounced it. The correct Russian pronunciation, he said, was Al-YEH-khin, explaining that the name was derived from that of a tree (‘alyesha’) that grew abundantly near one of his family’s estates. “Al-YOH-khin,” he claimed, was a Yiddish distortion of his name, like Trotsky for Troitsky or Feigl for the German Vogel. But strangely, no one whom I ever heard pronounce the name Al-YOH-khin was Jewish. One was a friendly elderly gentleman named (I believe) Tereshchenko. A Russian émigré like Alekhine, he had been named to the position of Alekhine’s second in the 1929 match against Bogolyubov mainly to please the world champion. He immediately antagonized Alekhine by addressing him as “Gospodin [Mr.] Alyokhin.”

Alekhine once told me that his family originally owned seven estates. The five

from his father's side, worth two million rubles in gold, had been gambled away by his father in Monte Carlo. The world champion apparently had been hoping for some time that the Germans would restore to him the two estates left by his mother. He was the only heir; his brother, whom I met in Moscow during the 1925 tournament, was murdered shortly afterward in connection with a love affair, according to newspaper reports outside Russia. There was a great deal of tragedy in his family.

After his return to Paris and his debut as an anti-Semitic author, Alekhine went to Germany and then to occupied Poland, where he lived most of the time. There he was an esteemed guest of Governor Hans Frank, who became known as the "Butcher of the Poles" and was hanged as such at Nuremberg. I had met Reichminister Frank several times during the 1934 match. He displayed a genuine interest in chess and showed no hostility toward the Jews Mieses and Nimzovich, who were there as reporters. I never quite understood how Frank could have become such a monster in Poland.

When it became obvious that Germany was losing the war, Alekhine fled to Spain on the pretext of participating in a tournament there. But when he arrived, instead of entering the tournament he claimed he was ill, and he remained ill even later, thus avoiding having to return to Germany. He was not eager to return to Nazi-controlled France either, since his service as a French officer during the war might have counted heavily against him. He was now having to deal with the consequences of the politically dangerous path he had chosen (a path similar to but not quite so dangerous as that of the Soviet chess master Dr. B., now living in North America, who had accepted a high rank in the pro-Nazi Russian army of General Vlassov.) [Footnote 3: Only the initial is given in both the German and English manuscripts of Kmoch's book. Who "Dr. B." might be is anybody's guess. B.H.] He was not welcome in England, either. Although the organizers of the London 1946 tournament would have been delighted with the participation of the world champion, they refrained from inviting Alekhine because of his wartime activities. Alekhine never again left the neutral territory beyond the Pyrenees.

Once while traveling in German-occupied territory, Alekhine contracted scarlet fever. This was in Prague, where Réti had died of the same malady in 1929. Alekhine recovered, thanks to his good physical condition, but his heavy drinking probably had done too much damage. Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine, born in Moscow on November 1, 1892, died at Estoril, Portugal, on March 24, 1946, while still world champion. Other reports notwithstanding, he actually died of a stroke. Najdorf assured me of this after speaking with the physician who had performed the postmortem examination of Alekhine's body.

Around 1953, while I was the secretary of the Manhattan Chess Club, Madame Four visited the club. She would not talk of the past, nor would I. I invited her to dinner, but she took only toast and tea. Soon afterward I learned she had died, at about eighty years of age.



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