

*History*

## Nicolas Rossolimo (28ii1910 – 24vii1975)

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For chess study enthusiasts, 1910 was a year especially rich in births since no less than three among the greatest names of chess study composition were born in Russia that year: Genrikh M. Kasparyan, Mark S. Liburkin and Tigran B. Gorgiev. These dates of birth were curiously distributed: Gorgiev and Liburkin were respectively born in a space of two days (30viii and 31viii), Kasparyan was born on 27ii followed by another great name of chess, Nicolas Rossolimo, on 28ii. For the first article of a new column in **EG** (thanks to Harold for proposing me to do the job), I have chosen the figure of Nicolas Rossolimo, a study composer with a modest output, but a captivating chess personality.

Nicolas Rossolimo had a novel-like life: born in Kiev, he moved to Moscow in the early 1920s with his mother and his elder brother. His father, Spiridon, Greek by birth but born in Russia<sup>(1)</sup>, was a renowned artist (he was the official painter of the Russian army) who was sent to Manchuria in order to paint land battles of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). He was abroad in 1917 and eventually settled in New York. Rossolimo's Russian mother, Xenia Nikolaevna, was an intellectual woman (she spoke 4 languages) and had met Spiridon in Manchuria where she had been sent as a war correspondent. She was in great danger in the

second half of the 1920s, when Stalin began to rule the country with an iron hand. Because (!) of the fact that she was a polyglot she was suspected of cosmopolitanism and thrown in jail, where she spent one year.



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Thanks to the Greek citizenship of her husband, she succeeded in getting out of the

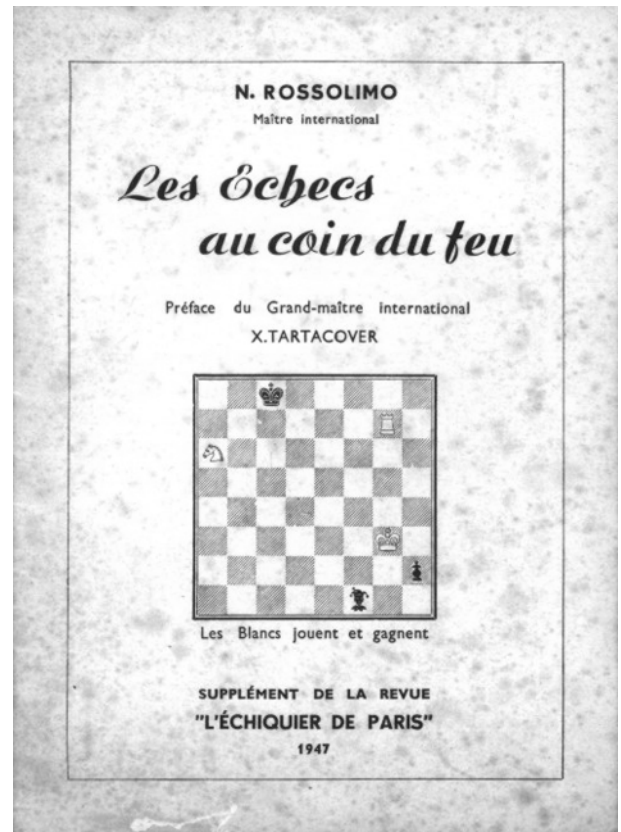
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(1) Nicolas' son, Alexander, did extensive research into the origin of the name Rossolimo. It is a Greek name (Nicolas Rossolimo's grandfather was captain of a ship, got shipwrecked in the Black sea near Odessa, and settled in Ukraine). The name is not uncommon in the Ionian Islands, especially in Cephalonia, where it can be found in the *Golden book of the Cephalonican Nobles* (1593). The origin of this family name is very interesting: it was discovered that it dates back to a certain Hugues de Sully, a French baron or general, who was in the service of the King of Naples, Charles d'Anjou (1227-1285). De Sully was red-headed and his nickname was Hugues le Rousseau ('roux' is French for red, that gave Rousseau, a variant of medieval Rousseau, as a common family name in France). Alteration of the nickname mixed with the last name gave Rossolimo.

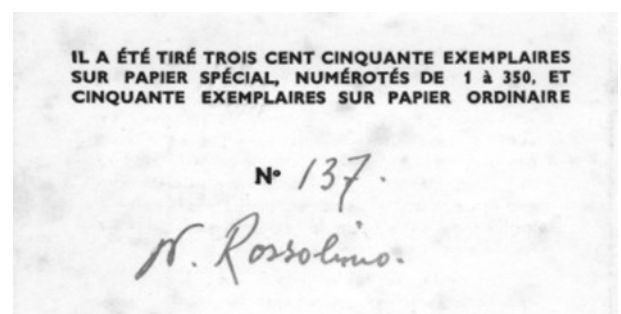
USSR in 1929 together with her sons. They spent a while in Czechoslovakia and finally arrived in Paris in that year (French was one of the 4 languages spoken by Xenia Nikolaevna). There, as many Russian émigrés, Rossolimo found a job as a cab driver. In Moscow he had reached ‘first-category’ level as a chess player (later, he told his son that he had won the junior Moscow championship) and was sufficiently strong to become one of the best players in the French capital. At the time, there were few opportunities for chess players: the annual Paris championship was attracting strong players, among which the best Russian émigrés or Polish players living in France (among the now forgotten names are J. Cukierman, V. Matveev, L. Monosson, O. Blum). Rossolimo took first place in three of these championships in the 1930s<sup>(1)</sup>, and came second and third in two other French championships. Just before World War II, Rossolimo had good results in his first two international tournaments: he came second after Capablanca in 1938, and in 1939 won the Paris tournament, ahead of the famous French-Polish player Savielly Tartakower.

But WWII broke out. Rossolimo’s career as a chess player was interrupted. In 1947, he acquired French nationality and decided to study chess seriously in order to become a professional player. His trainer was Camil Seneca, (1903-1977) a great problem composer, born in Romania, who had been living in France since the 1920s. He quickly improved his level with the outcome that he won the French title in 1948 and had a series of excellent results in various European tournaments during the next few years. He was awarded the IM title in 1950, and the IGM title in 1953. He was at his peak in 1951 (his best historical Elo rating, as calculated by Chessmetrics, was 2663). Then, after a long wait for a visa, with his wife, Vera Anatolievna Budakovich (1914-1995) and their son Alexander, he crossed the Atlantic to

rejoin his father and mother. He finally settled in New York where he opened his famous Chess Studio, located in Manhattan. There,



Cover of *Les Echecs au coin du feu*



Rossolimo’s autograph in HH’s copy of the booklet. It’s curious that there are 350 copies of the book on special paper and only 50 on standard paper!

(1) In the 1931 Paris championship, no less than three chess composers competed: Vitaly Halberstadt (1903-1967), born in Ukraine (Odessa), Camil Seneca (1903-1975), born in Bucharest, Rumania and Frédéric Lazard (1883-1948).

chess amateurs could buy chess books or sets, take chess lessons and eat a sandwich or have a coffee and, occasionally, play against him for a fee. Unfortunately for him, Rossolimo quickly understood that earning his life as a chess player was not possible in the USA as it was the pre-Fischer era. So, he had to work during the day to support his family, for instance as a bellboy at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, or as a busboy. He also drove (again) a cab. He had plans for returning to France but then his son, Alexander (born in Paris in 1939) would have been sent to Algeria as a French soldier, so Rossolimo decided to stay in America. Nevertheless, in the last part of his life, he opened a second chess studio in Spain (but the experience was disappointing) and even played for France during the 1972 Olympiad. His death was tragic: he was found unconscious after an accidental fall and died in hospital three days later from his head injuries.

As a player, Nicolas Rossolimo was an artist: he won many brilliancy prizes. Pal Benko wrote in Rossolimo's obituary published in *Chess Life and Review* (October 1975): 'Nick considered chess first of all an art' and added: 'He even suggested that points be awarded according to the artistic merit of a game, rather than for its result'. So, it is not a big surprise that Nicolas Rossolimo shown great interest in the endgame study, especially during his early years of chess activity. Most of his studies were published in Soviet chess journals (*Shakhmaty*, *Shakhmatny Listok*, *Izvestia*) from 1926 to 1929, some others in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and 1930. His first published study dates back to September 1926 when he was only 16<sup>(1)</sup>. One of these studies, maybe

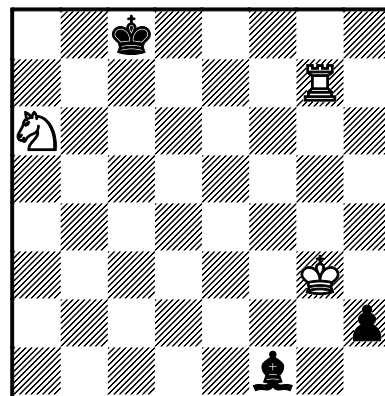
the finest of his output, was composed with the great Sergei Kaminer (1908-1938), a friend of world champion Mikhail Botvinnik: unfortunately it has been cooked.

Here are two among his best studies, both featuring a systematic manoeuvre :

P1 N. Rossolimo

1st hon. mention

*Izvestia* 1929-1930 (9i1930)



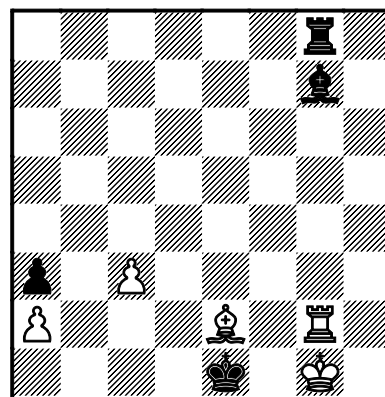
g3c8 0131.01 3/3 Win

1.Rg8+ Kb7 (Kd7; Sb8+) 2.Sc5+ Kb6 (Kc6; Rc8+) 3.Sa4+ Kb5 4.Sc3+ Kb4 5.Sa2+ Kb3 6.Sc1+ Kb2 7.Kxh2 Kxc1 8.Rg1 wins.

P2 N. Rossolimo

3rd hon. mention

*Československy Sach* 1930 (i1930)



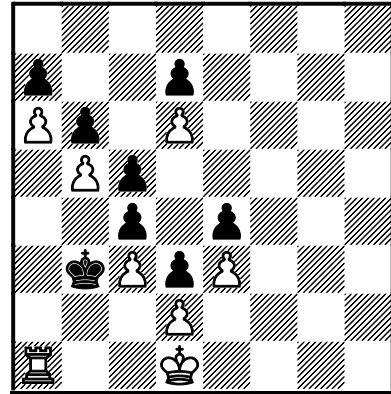
gle1 0440.21 5/4 win

(1) You may have an idea of the effervescence of the period if you look at the following list of a dozen of composers born around 1910 – the so called 1910-generation – and the year their first study was published (in italics): R.N. Alexandrov (b. 1911) *1928*; G. Afanasyev (b. 1909) *1926*; Z. Birnov (b. 1911) *1927*; V. Bron (b. 1909) *1926*; T. Gorgiev (b. 1910) *1927*; A. Gulyaev (b. 1908) *1926*; S. Kaminer (b. 1908) *1924*; G. Kasparyan (b. 1910) *1928*; M.S. Liburkin (b. 1910) *1927*; V. Yakimchik (b. 1909) *1927*; A. Sarychev (b. 1909) *1927*; Somov-Nasimovich (b. 1910) *1926*; Zakhodiakin (b. 1912) *1929*. The most amazing is that many of these composers, teenagers trying to seize the power, didn't wait for feature maturity before producing masterpieces. And to crown it all, remember that this 'new blood' was joining the older generation, still active, grandees such as the Kubbel and Platov brothers, Simkhovich, Zalkind, Grigoriev, Gurvich, Herbstman ... and 'father' Troitzky himself !

1.Ba6 (1.Bc4? Rc8 2.Be6 Rc7!) Ra8 (Kd1 2.Bc4 Rc8 3.Bb3+) 2.Bb7 Rg8 3.Bc6 Rc8 4.Bd7 Rg8 5.Be6 Re8 6.Bf7 wins.

During the 1930s Rossolimo's interest in studies faded. One was published in Paris, in *Les Dernières Nouvelles (Poslednie Novosti)*. That was a Russian liberal newspaper run by Pavel Milioukov, who was a former minister of the 1917 Kerenski government before the Bolsheviks took over<sup>(1)</sup>. Rossolimo composed his last study in 1934 but did not publish it at the time. It is the last study in *les Echecs au coin du feu* (1947), a booklet collecting Rossolimo's output (12 studies) that was published by the author in Paris with a foreword by Savielly Tartakower. Here it is:

P3 N. Rossolimo  
*Les Echecs au coin du feu* 1947



d1b3 0100.67 8/8 Win

1.Ra5! (1.Kc1? stalemate; 1.Ke1? Kb2 2.Rd1 Kc2 3.Ra1 Kb2 4.Ra5 Kc2 draws) 1...Kb2 2.Ra4! Kb3 3.Ra1! Kb2 4.Ra5! Kb3 5.Kc1! It is no longer stalemate, thanks to the rook manoeuvre.

(1) Rossolimo was a member of the Potemkine Chess Club, in Levallois-Perret, near Paris, a chess club that attracted many Russian émigrés. A group picture, taken on 2vii1932, just after their victory in the French team championship, shows the full chess team, among which Rossolimo and Halberstadt (see the photograph on [www.mjae.com./russes\\_blancs.html](http://www.mjae.com./russes_blancs.html)).