

History

A.O. Herbstman (10iv1900 - 22v1982)

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Thirty years ago, Alexander Herbstman died in Stockholm. Of course, we know him as a great composer of studies but he was much more. This article aims at showing this multifaceted man, sometimes described as a 'modern Shiva'.

Alexander Osipovich Herbstman⁽¹⁾ was born in Rostov-on-Don, a large town in Southern Russia (1076 km south-east of Moscow), mostly on the right bank of the Don River, only 32 km from the Sea of Azov. The town was first a simple custom house, then a fortress was built in 1771. It quickly became a busy port, on the intersection of trade routes. In 1900, Rostov had around 110,000 inhabitants (today 1,100,000), among which were many Armenians, who had their own quarter, a lot of Cossacks and a community of 12,000 Jews.

Herbstman's life is relatively well known: he wrote several autobiographical articles, mostly related to chess. Information about his professional career, can be found in books or websites on Rostov⁽²⁾ or a book – also in Russian and available on the internet – about the Jews in the Rostov region: *Evrei na donsco zemle*, by Mihail Gontmakher. It contains numerous short biographies of notable people from Rostov. However, this book seems not to be fully reliable as it contains some mistakes.

Herbstman grew up in a wealthy Jewish community: Iosif (Osip) Israelevich, his father, was a doctor who had studied at Kharkov University before specialising in venerology in Vienna. There was an intellectual atmosphere at home: a brother of Iosif's wife corresponded with the writer Anton Chekhov. The family was especially fond of poetry.

In his article 'Memories of famous composers', written for EG65, Herbstman writes that, in his childhood, he spent 'a long time' in Switzerland, near Lucerne in a small village on the shore of Lake Lucerne (Vierwaldstättersee in German). He doesn't give any explanation in his article for this long stay abroad. Was it for medical reasons? Rostov-on-Don, like Odessa, was known as a source of endemic cholera, with some epidemic outbreaks. Or was it for security reasons? The beginning of the XXth century was marked by a wave of anti-jewish pogroms in many cities of the Russian Empire, especially in the 1903-1906 years. In October 1905, 150 Jews lost their lives in Rostov: Cossack units took part in the

(1) His name in Latin characters is generally spelled Herbstman, with only one final n, as in the Cyrillic. But in several Soviet publications such as *64, Shakhmaty* or *Shakhmatny Listok*, quite strangely, his name was transcribed as Herbstmann (and sometimes also Gerbstmann), like also in Hungarian (*Magyar Sakkvilág*) or in Spanish. Caputto (in *El arte del Estudio*, vol 4, p. 98) indicates that Herbstman is the spelling chosen by the composer himself for his grave in Stockholm. A picture of his grave confirms this (see *Zadachy y Etyudy* no. 20, 2000, p. 9). For the patronymic, I have retained the 'classical' Osipovich, as in most of the Russian or Soviet sources. But, in both articles of *Zadachy y Etyudy* devoted to Herbstman for the 100th anniversary of his birth, or in the 1990 *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar* (encyclopedia dictionary), we find A.I., for Aleksandr Iosifovich. When Herbstman once had to renew his passport, inattentive officials wrongly changed Osipovich into Iosifovich...

(2) For instance, see www.rostov50.ru a website (in Russian) devoted to personalities from this town (more precisely, the relevant page is: http://www.rostov50.ru/1950_gerbstman.html).

pogrom. Some years later, the parents of IGM Savielly Tartakower (1887-1956) were killed in Rostov, the town where the Polish-French grandmaster was born (his parents, Austrian citizens, coming from Poland, had settled in Rostov in the 80's). I am inclined to favour a second hypothesis that Iosif Herbstman sent his son far from Rostov in 1918 in order to save him from the rage of violence during the Civil War. He was afraid that Alexander could be enrolled in the *Dobrovolshevskaya armiya* (Volunteer Army), an anti-bolshevik army. In November 1917, after an uprising of the Volunteer Army, Rostov-on-Don had been taken by the Whites led by General Denikin. Civil War had begun very early in the Don region when Kaledin, a Cossack General, had refused to recognize the new Bolshevik rule. The Whites held Rostov until spring 1918 and the whole region remained unsafe. Iosif Herbstman chose Georgia's capital, Tiflis (today Tbilisi) where he settled temporarily with his son; in March 1919, his wife and Nina, Alexander's sister, joined them. They all stayed in Georgia, then an independent country, until October 1919. The poet Ossip Mandelstam, who also spent two years in Georgia (1920-1921) described the country as a 'new Switzerland', a 'neutral piece of land from innocent from birth'...

There is no doubt that poetry was Herbstman's first great passion. In his obituary in *Tidskrift för Schack* (that was condensed and translated by John Roycroft in EG71), Alexander Hildebrand recalls that he and Herbstman 'spent many evenings together discussing... literature... And he had personal memories of Mayakovsky, Yesenin, Mandelshtam, Balmont, Brussov and others of Russian Parnassus'. (Hildebrand's spelling of some of these names is personal). This was not boastfulness. When he was still a teenager, Herbstman had the opportunity to meet some of the greatest names of Russian poetry.

His interest in poetry was precocious: in 1916, he sent his first poems to Valery Bryusov (1873-1924), a Symbolist, one the major poets of the pre-revolutionary period; one year

later, at only 17, he published his first collection of poems, *Otvleski moliniy* (*Flashes of Lightning*). When he was in Tbilisi, Alexander got in touch with notable local poets, organized in a Guild of Poets. He also contributed, with his sister Nina, to the 'Tbilissi Poet workshop'. A second collection of his poems appeared in 1925 (*Volchy Vorota* – the literal translation sounds strangely: *Door of Wolf*). His sister, Nina Osipovna (1904-1990) also had the fire of poetry in her blood. Just as her brother, she published two collections of poems but under the pseudonym of Nina Gratchianska, first *Seif Serdtsa* (*A Safe of the Hearts*) in 1922 and, three years later, *Na Stremenakh* (*In the Stirrups*). I didn't find any judgment about the quality of Alexander's poems but Nina's modest output, at least in quantity, was enough to deserve an entry in the *Dictionary of Russian women writers* (M. Ledkovskaia-Astman, C. Rosenthal, M. Fleming Zirin, Greenwood, 1994). Russian critic Boris Gusman, in his book *One-Hundred Poets* (1923), selected her for his list of poets he portrayed. Her 1922 book is still on sale in the catalogue of some Russian antiquarian bookshops.

The whole Herbstman family idolized poets, not only poets from the past but also living poets. Their house, located in *Nikolskaya ulitsa*, that became, after 1917, *Socialisticheskaya ulitsa* – was a literary salon and Iosif was a Maecenas. Rostov-on-Don, on the road to the Caucasus, was from time to time visited by poets from Moscow or Petersburg: for instance, Balmont in 1917, Yesenin in 1920, Mandelstam in 1922. These visits were great events for the Herbstmans. It is with Yesenin that their intense relationship with poetry took a personal turn.

Sergei Alexandrovich Yesenin (1895-1925) occupies a peculiar place in the rich constellation of Russian poets: today he remains one of the most popular poets in his country, even if Soviet critics have been less enthusiastic about him. His self destructive life (he committed suicide in 1925, even if some doubts remain about the actual causes of his tragic

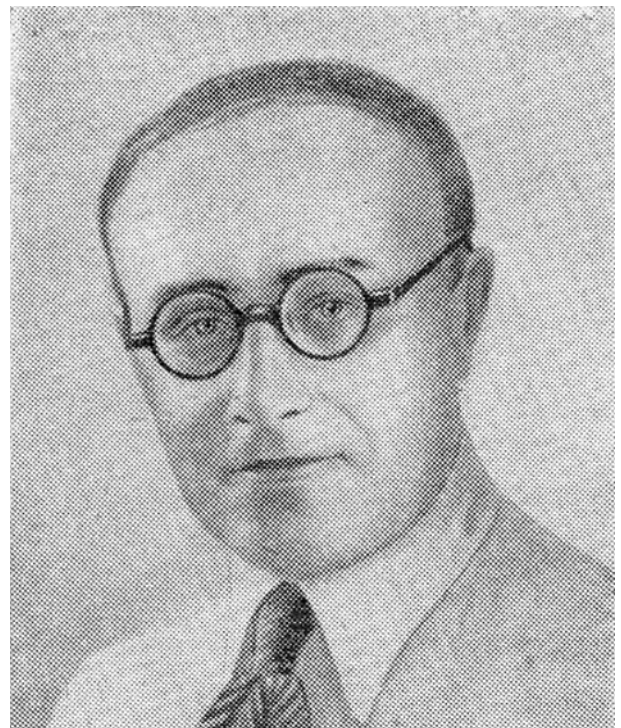
death) earned him the nickname of *hooligan poet*. He had begun his career as a ‘peasant folk poet’, promoted by the symbolist Alexander Blok, and in 1919 he was one of the founder of the Imaginist movement, who wanted to compete with Mayakovsky’s Futurism. According to Varlam Shalamov in his *Tales of the Kolyma*, Yesenin was the only poet recognized and canonized by the underworld.

It is quite impossible to imagine today the intellectual effervescence of these post-revolutionary years. *Symbolism* (Bryusov, Biely, Blok), *Imaginism* (Yesenin, Marienhof), *Futurism* (Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov), *Acmeism* (Gorodetsky, Mandelstam, Akhmatova): all these movements succeeded one another or coexisted, sometimes as rivals, in two decades. There was also a small group especially active in Rostov in 1920; the *Nichevoki* (Nothingists) who claimed an affinity with Western Dadaists. The new regime tried to win intellectuals over, even those who were not communists. In 1920, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was in charge of the *Narkompros* (*Narodnyi Komissariat Prosvescheniya*, the People’s Commissariat for Education or in other terms, Commissariat for Enlightenment) sent Yesenin and his close friend Anatoly Marienhof to give a series of lectures in South Russia and Caucasus. During the journey they travelled and lived in a special train.

Yesenin was a drunkard and a compulsive womanizer. During his short life, he married no less than four times and had countless affairs. In Rostov, he immediately felt in love with the young poetess Nina (she was only 16), Herbstman’s sister. He offered her a copy of his second collection of poems, *Goluben*, with a special dedication on the front page: ‘I console myself, thinking that, before, I was as young as is Nina Ossipovna’. He literally laid siege to Herbstman’s house and came every day to see her, 45 days in a row. She also met him in the wagon where he was living... In July, Yesenin left Rostov and resumed his journey to the Caucasus. Two years later, he came back to the South but spent just one day

in Rostov: it is known (from a letter he wrote to Marienhof) that he met again the young woman, in a dramatic atmosphere.

Nina’s relationship with Yesenin remained a highlight of her life: she wrote about him, just after his suicide in Leningrad (December 1925). Nina found it hard to recover from that blow. Like her brother, but probably for different reasons, she no longer published poems. She married, left Rostov and came back in her native town, where she worked as a librarian.



Picture reproduced from A. Kazantsev;
R. Kofman & M. Liburkin (Moscow 1955):
Sovietsky Shakhmatny Etyud, p. 207.

Herbstman’s reaction to this is not known. He had begun to study medicine in Rostov in the early twenties, but the power of attraction of literature was stronger. From 1922 to 1925, he attended a three year course in Moscow at the *Higher Institute of Literary Arts*, a new institution for young writers. The institute had been created in 1921. Its first director was Valery Bryusov, the poet Herbstman had selected in 1916 to send his first poems to. It seems that Herbstman, after his Muscovite stay, gave up any personal literary ambitions (he no longer published books of poetry). Af-

ter 1925, intellectual life in the USSR became different, the stirrings of revolution were over, and after Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 there were no more great 'romantic' poets. Daring in poetry was no longer possible under Stalin's rule. Worst, most of the poets he (and his sister) had personally known were dead or in exile far from the Soviet Union. Chess poetry was less dangerous. Maybe Herbstman had simply discovered that he was more gifted of chess composition than for poetry. But he never fully gave up poetry since, in his academic career, he had the opportunity to keep in touch with great writers.

Herbstman said that he had discovered chess composition in 1923 during his stay in Moscow. He composed his first studies in 1924 and published them from 1925. But there is a lesser known aspect of his passion for chess. For his first book about chess, Herbstman chose a very original subject: chess and psychoanalysis. In 1925, 5 years before his first book about studies, he published *Психоанализ шахматной игры (Опыт толкования)* (in English: *Psychoanalysis of chess (an attempt at interpretation)*).

Psychoanalysis was a new thing in USSR. In the first years that followed the Russian Revolution, several key party leaders, not only Trotsky, were well disposed towards Freudism. A Russian Psychoanalysis society was officially created, with the support of the Narkompros. An orphanage opened on the grounds of its head office, the *Detski Dom*, that was something unique in Europe. It was run by Vera Schmidt (1889-1937). Her assistant was Sabina Spielrein (1885-1942), from Rostov-on-Don (a recent movie, *A dangerous method*, by David Cronenberg, brought to light this brilliant personality of the psychoanalytic movement). We don't know whether Herbstman personally knew Sabina Spielrein. She had left Rostov-on-Don in 1904 for treat-

ment in a Zürich mental hospital. In 1911 she graduated and defended her dissertation about schizophrenia and returned to USSR in 1923. She was back in Rostov in 1924, where she worked in a psychoanalytic children nursery and taught at the Rostov university. One can imagine that the Herbstman and Spielrein families knew each other. Was he introduced to psychoanalysis by her, in 1923 or 1924, in Moscow? Anyway, Herbstman must have quickly assimilated the psychoanalytical theory in order to write his book.

Alexander Morozevich, in an interview (for the *Kingpin* magazine) once said that Herbstman's book was among the five most important chess books he ever read. Herbstman's book is rarely quoted, probably because it has not been translated and therefore is hardly known abroad (it would be very interesting to learn whether Morozevich's opinion is shared by other Russian chessplayers). I quote below an appreciation about Herbstman's work by Norman Reider (*Chess, Oedipus, and the Mater Dolorosa*) taken from the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (40, 1959, pp. 320-333). Reider, a member of the San Francisco Psychoanalysis Institute, also a chief of service at San Francisco hospital, had not been able to read the Russian text, but had been personally informed by W. Hoffer, a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytical society.

'The classical psychoanalytic paper on chess is the study by Jones⁽¹⁾ on the famous American prodigy of 100 years ago, Paul Morphy. Jones developed the thesis that chess is a game of father-murder, which became the pattern for most psychoanalytic studies on the subject. *Yet the same theme was advanced by an earlier writer, Alexander Herbstman, whose work, published in Moscow in 1925, could not have influenced the psychoanalytic literature* [I underline]. Herbstman, a physician⁽²⁾, and a chess problemist, made a sys-

(1) This refers to the study that was written by a key figure of the psychoanalytical movement, Ernest Jones, "The problem of Paul Morphy. A contribution to the psycho-analysis of chess", *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 12, n° 1, 1931.

(2) Herbstman is presented as a 'physician', probably because he had begun to study medicine in the early 20's.

tematic study of the form and content of chess. He paid tribute to Freud, Sachs, Ferenczi, Rank, Jung, Richlin, Abraham, and Jones for elucidating the unconscious. He began his essay by considering the preoccupation of the game with royal figures, especially the king and queen, and quoted Freud as follows: “In dreams the parents assume a royal or imperial form as a couple. You find a parallel to this in stories. ‘There lived once a king and a queen’ when obviously the account is about the father and mother.” He then developed the thesis that the whole play of the game is an elaboration in numerous varieties and derivatives of the oedipal situation. To him the game consists primarily of the king, queen, and pawn, with the other pieces being displaced images of king or queen. Herbstman also discussed the concept of ambivalence as represented in chess, analysed some dreams of chess, and attempted to explain certain early legends of chess, on the basis of the oedipal conflict.’

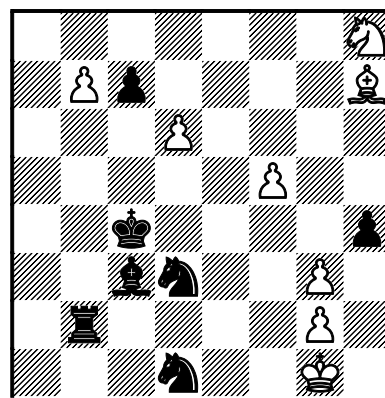
It would be interesting to know how Herbstman’s book, written by an unknown author in the field of chess, was received in the Soviet chess world. Anyway caution was required, because the wind was changing. The same year, in 1925, the Narkompros closed the Children’s Home. A campaign was launched against Freudism (that was defined as a ‘reactionary and idealistic trend in the service of imperialism’) and was replaced by a new ‘science’, Pedology, the study of the character, growth, and development of children, a kind of combination of pedagogy and psychology. The problem was that pedology was no longer, as psychoanalysis had been, a means of emancipation of man, but an attempt to build a docile and uniform character (‘the mass construction of new Soviet man’). One of the leaders of this new discipline was Aaron Borisovich Zalkind. This name sounds familiar to chess composition amateurs. Zalkind (1888-1936) was none other than the brother of Lazar Borisovich Zalkind (1886-1945), the famous composer of chess studies and problems. Aaron Zalkind was famous for his ‘twelve commandments’, a set of restrictive

rules of conduct among which we find this one: ‘sexual abstinence is essential until marriage and sexual selection should occur in accordance with class and revolutionary proletarian selection’. Another one is piquant: ‘Society class, in the interests of revolutionary expediency, has a right to intervene with the sexual life of its members’...

After 1930, with Stalin’s grip on every sector of intellectual life in Soviet Union, even pedology became dangerous. Zalkind was accused of ‘menshevizing and idealistic eclecticism’ (at the same time, his brother Lazar, an economist by profession, was arrested and accused of plotting against the regime in association with ‘pro-Mensheviks’ and sent to Gulag). In 1932, Herbstman had to write a collective letter addressed to A. Zalkind, condemning his views. Zalkind was not sent to a camp like his brother, but he was removed as director of his institute. In 1936, he died from a heart attack in the street, just after learning that pedology had definitively been liquidated as a field of scientific research.

P.1. A.O. Herbstman

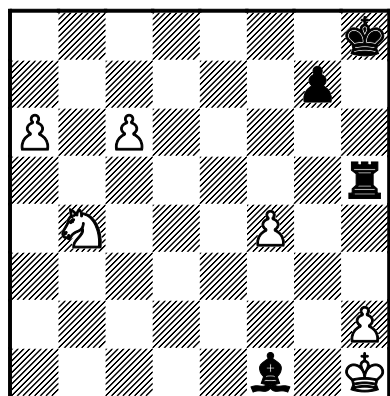
1st prize equal *Magyar Sakkvilag* 1927,
version 1928



g1c4 0347.52 8/7 Draw

1.Bg8+! Kc5 2.dxc7 Bd4+ 3.Kh2! (3.Kf1? Se3+ 4.Kg1 Sd5+; 3.Kh1? S1f2+ 4.Kh2 fxg3+ 5.Kxg3 Be5+ wins) **3...hxc3+ 4.Kh3 S1f2+ 5.Kh4 Bf6+ 6.Kh5 Sf4+ 7.Kh6 Sg4+ 8.Kh7** (thanks to first move, h7 is free for the King) **8...Rxb7 9.Sf7 Rxc7** stalemate with a Bishop incarcerated and a pinned Knight.

P.2. A.O. Herbstman
Shakhmatny Listok 1928

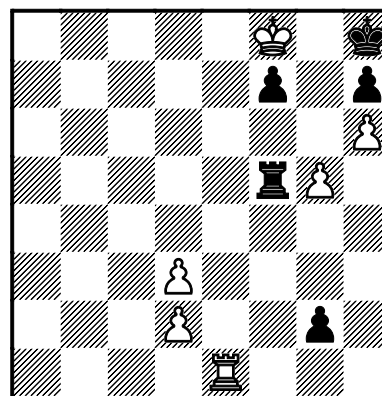


h1h8 0331.41 6/4 Win

1.c7 Bh3 2.f5! (Novotny no.1; 2.a7 ? Ra5 Black wins) **2...Bxf5 3.a7 Be4+ 4.Kg1 Rg5+! 5.Kf2!** (5.Kf1? Rf5+ 6.K- Rf8 Black wins) **5...Rc5** (now 5...Rf5+ 6.Ke3 Rf8 7.Kxe4 wins) **6.Sc6!** (Novotny no.2) **6...Bxc6 (Rxc6) 7.c8Q (a8Q)+** wins.

1.Re8 Re5! 2.Ra8! (2.Rxe5? g1Q 3.Re8 Qa7; 2.Rb8? Rb5 3.Ra8 Rb7) **2...Ra5!**

P.3. A.O. Herbstman
1st prize *Shakhmaty v SSSR* 1936



f8h8 0400.43 6/5 Win

3.Rxa5 g1Q 4.Ra8 Qg2 5.Rb8 Qg3 6.Rc8 Qg4 7.Rd8 Qxg5 (7...Qe6 8.d4 Qf6 9.Re8! wins) **8.Re8 Qf6** (8...Qg8+ 9.Ke7 Qxe8+ 10.Kxe8 f5 11.d4 f4 12.d5 f3 13.d6 f2 14.d7 f1Q 15.d8Q Qf8+ 16.Kd7! wins) **9.d4** wins.

(to be continued)

Tata Steel Endgame Study Solving 2013

Yochanan Afek informs us that the organizing committee of the Tata Steel grandmaster tournament wants another Endgame Study Solving event during the 2013 GM tournament (11i2013 – 27i2013). More details will be published in **EG190**.