

History

A.O. Herbstman (10iv1900 - 22v1982) (part 2)

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In 1925 Herbstman published his first chess study. He quickly became a prolific composer, especially in the period 1925-1930. He met the Platov brothers and quickly became a friend of Nikolai Grigoriev (Herbstman in EG65: 'He and I spent the summer of 1925 in the Caucasus, at Nalchik, where my parents had a country place').

He also soon developed great activity as a true 'propagandist' of chess studies by writing articles (many were published in the second half of the twenties, some of them were even translated and published in chess magazines abroad) and books about studies: no less than three were published in the thirties (1930, 1934, 1937).

For Herbstman composing was not only a solitary process. It seems that, from the beginning, his wish was to establish strong relationships with other composers. For instance, as related in EG65, he didn't submit his first studies by mail but brought them himself to the editorial staff: this gave him the opportunity of meeting the Platov brothers.

Quite logically, he frequently composed jointly, with some of the greatest names (Kubbel, Korolkov, Gorgiev...) but also with lesser known composers like Boris Didrichson and Evgeny Umnov⁽¹⁾ (both from... Rostov!). In the last part of his career of composer, he composed jointly with, for instance, Leonard Katsnelson, Viktor Razumenko and sometimes with Alexander Hildebrand.

Herbstman's name is closely linked with Leningrad, where he carried on a large part of his professional career. He probably sojourned in Leningrad for the first time just after completing his three-year course in Moscow, as he wrote: 'It was in 1925 that I first met Leonid Kubbel. Soon afterwards (the actual date was 25vi1926) he became president of the Leningrad circle of chess composers. We met each other at the circle's gatherings...' These sentences, taken from his preface for the book *Leonid Kubbel's Chess Endgame Studies*, by T. Whitworth, give the strong impression that Herbstman already lived at that time in Leningrad. But Gontmakher writes that he was back in Rostov-on-Don at the end of 1926 and the examination of columns of magazines in which Herbstman published his original studies confirms that, till 1930, Rostov was, at least officially, his town of residence. Despite the distance between Rostov and Leningrad (more than 1500 kilometers), did he divide his life between these two towns? Probably, otherwise it is not possible to understand how Kubbel could have presented him a study as related by Herbstman in the same preface, probably in the first months of 1929. He writes: 'On one occasion Leonid Kubbel showed us this study [n° 215 in T. Whitworth 1984 collection]. Hard as we tried, we could not find the solution... This study delighted me, Leonid smiled and said: I shall dedicate it to you, and with this dedication I shall enter it for a big composing tourney.' Timothy Whitworth has found the *Magyar Sakkvilag*

(1) Later, Evgeny Ivanovich Umnov (1913-1989) became one of the main Russian authors of chess books devoted to problems.

page (November 1929, p 319) with the original study and its dedication.

It was only in 1934 that Herbstman took up an academic career, in order to earn his living as a professor. The rest of his life is a long list of academic positions and titles: in 1934, as he writes in EG65, he ‘embarked upon a course of post-graduate studies in Leningrad’. So far, according to Gontmakher, Herbstman had had a first experience in teaching at the Rostov teacher’s training college. Of course, he could aspire to higher positions. In Leningrad, he specialised in French literature, and chose Balzac as subject of study. Balzac, a popular author in Russia, is known as a major novelist for his monument work, *The Human Comedy*, but Herbstman chose to study his theater (later, in 1972, Herbstman published a second book about Balzac, a biography for students). He gained the degree of candidate of sciences with his dissertation about Balzac’s theater, that was published in 1938, and became associate professor. In 1957, he defended his thesis on Pushkin’s novel *Evgeny Onegin* and the question of realism, and became a full professor. He taught in numerous universities or colleges: in Rostov, just after the town’s liberation from German occupation (February 1943, less than two weeks after the end of the Battle of Stalingrad), in Leningrad from 1944 till 1948 (in a letter to his friend Abraham Model, dated 23vii1944, V.A Korolkov announces: ‘I’ve got a letter from master A. Herbstman... he returns to Leningrad with the Academy of Arts.’)⁽¹⁾, at the Rostov University again in 1948-9 where he was assistant professor, then in Nalchik (in the Nakhichevan) in 1950-51 where he taught at the pedagogic institute of Kabardin Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan) from 1952 where he taught Russian and foreign literature at the university and ran its department of Russian literature, in Leningrad again, from 1960, then Taganrog (a town near Rostov) in 1965 at the pedagogic institute, and, at last, in

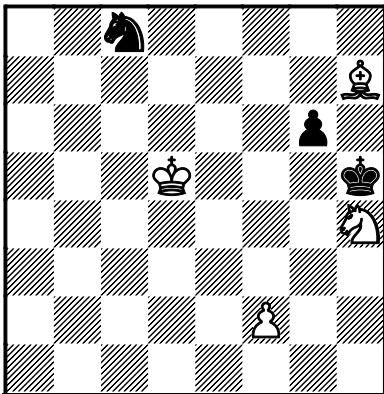
1966, at the Institute of Russian Literature of the USSR Academy of Sciences (in Moscow according to Gontmakher – this seems doubtful, since he is supposed to have been in Leningrad during his last years of professional activity – A.Hildebrand, in his article for *Zadachy y Etudy*, mentions that he met Herbstman and his family in June 1969 and that it was in Leningrad).

Gontmakher writes that Herbstman was a victim of political repression in 1938, and that he was briefly imprisoned. This is not confirmed in Herbstman’s biography found on the website www.rostov50.ru (a question mark is added to the assertion). The same for the beginning of the 1950’s: Gontmakher notes that Herbstman had to leave Rostov for Nalchik, in order to escape from the wave of anti-semitic arrestations. Herbstman told Hildebrand that he never took any interest in politics and that he only loved literature, chess and music. He expressed his regret at having been forced to write letters as in the Zalkind affair (see first part of this article).

In the last years of his life, he decided to emigrate, with his wife, Taissa, and their daughter, Marina. John Roycroft, who visited the Herbstman family in the autumn of 1979, some months before their departure from USSR, points out that life was not easy for Jews. He also remembers that they were preparing their departure and that they were disappointed that John could not help them with emigrating. Fortunately for them, the years 1979 and 1980 were ‘good’ years for emigrating (around 21,500 Jews were authorized to leave USSR in 1980, less than 900 in 1984). Gontmakher, in his book published some years after the fall of USSR, gives another version: according to him, Herbstman felt ill during a stop in Stockholm, on the way to the USA. He was going there in order to attend the marriage of his daughter. Indeed, at 80, Herbstman had a young daughter, Marina, of marriageable age (Hildebrand, in his *Zadachy*

(1) This letter, quoted in an article by A. Kentler about Chess during the Leningrad blockade, can be found here: <http://www.e3e5.com/article.php?id=475>.

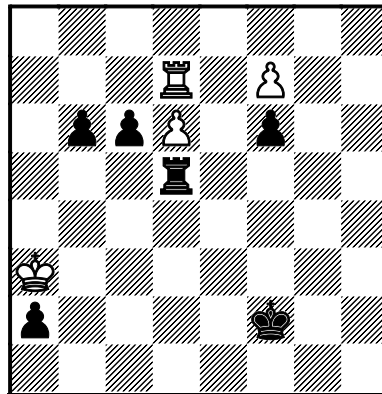
P.1. A.O.Herbstman
1st prize
Shakhmaty v SSSR 1945



d5h5 0014.11 4/3 win

1.Sf3! (1.Sxg6? Kh6 2.Sf8 Kg7 draws) **Kh6 2.Bg8 Se7+ 3.Ke6 Sxg8 4.Kf7 Kh7** (4...g5 5.Kxg8 g4 6.Sd4(g1) Kg6 7.Kh8 Kh6 8.Se2 Kg6 9.Sg3 wins) **5.Sg5+ Kh8** (5...Kh6 6.f4 Kh5 7.Kxg8 Kg4 8.Se6 wins) **6.f3!** (6.f4? Sh6 7.Kxg6 Sg4 draws) **Sh6+ 7.Kxg6 Sg8 8.Sf7 mate.**

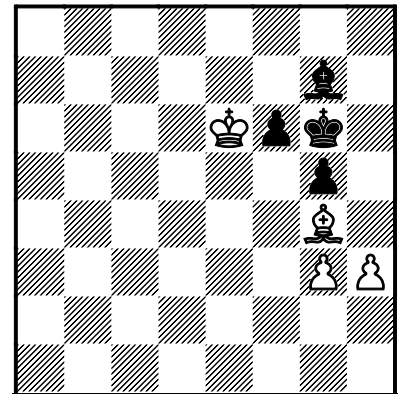
P.2. A.O.Herbstman
1st prize *Achalgazdra Kommunisti 1954*



a3f2 0400.24 4/6 draw

1.Kb2! (1.Kxa2? f5! 2.f8Q Ra5+ 3.Kb2 Rb5+ 4.Kc3 Rc5+ 5.Kd4 Rd5+ 6.Kc3 Rc5+ draws, or 2.Ra7 Re5! 3.f8Q Re2+ 4.Ka3 Re3+ 5.Ka4 Re4+ 6.Kb3 Re3+ 7.Kc4 Re4+ draws) **a1Q+** (1...Rb5+ 2.Ka1! wins) **2.Kxa1 Ra5+ (2...f5 3.Ra7 Re5 4.Ra2+ wins) 3.Kb2 Rb5+ (3...f5 4.Ra7! Rxa7 5.f8Q Ra5 6.d7 Rb5+ 7.Kc3 wins) 4.Kc3 Rc5+ 5.Kd4 f5 6.Ra7! Rd5 7.Kc3 Rc5+ 8.Kb2 Rb5+ 9.Ka1 Re5 10.Ra2+ wins.**

P.3. A.O.Herbstman
1st prize *Shakhmaty v SSSR 1956 (1st half)*



g6e6 0040.22 4/4 win

1.Bf5+ Kh6 (1...Kh5 2.Kf7! Kh6 3.Kg8 g4 4.h4 wins) 2.Ke7! (2.Kf7? g4! 3.hxg4 Kg5 4.Kxg7 stalemate, or 3.h4 Kh5 4.Kg8 Kh6 draws, or 3.Bxg4 f5 4.Bxf5 Be5 5.g4 Bf6(g3) draws) **g4 3.h4 Kh5 4.Kf7 Kh6 5.Kg8 Kh5 6.Kh7 wins.**

y Etyudy article, writes that Marina was 19 in 1980). The Gontmakher biography tells us that Alexander had married, around 1960, one of his students (his second marriage). Maybe their decision to emigrate was taken for the sake of Marina's future, as Iosif Herbstman, 61 years before, had decided to leave Rostov for Georgia for the sake of his son. But for Alexander, it was a definitive departure, in difficult circumstances: he was an old man, with a failing health. Alexander Hildebrand, in his article that was reprinted in **EG71**, related how he welcomed Herbstman and his family in Sweden in September 1980. In his *Zadachy y Etyudy* article, he gave more information: in December 1979, after some years of epistolary

silence, Hildebrand received a letter from his old friend, from Vienna. He had been authorized to emigrate to Israel, but with his weak heart, this country was inadvisable. Herbstman spent some months in Rome. A country of Northern Europe was preferable. From Rome, he got in touch with Morton Narowe, a rabbi from America who had settled in Stockholm. After some weeks, during which they all waited for their papers, they were able to reach Sweden.

This late 'defection' earned him the removal of any mention of his name in *Triumph Sovetskogo Shakhmatnogo Etyuda* (in English: *Triumph of the Soviet Chess Study*), the third volume of Bondarenko's series of books about

the study, covering the 1925-1944 years, that was published in 1984. This volume contains an interesting first part (pp 4-10), with a survey of the development of the Soviet study in the 20's and the 30's. Bondarenko quotes most of the books published during this period, excepted those written by Herbstman. He also mentions several articles written by Gorgiev, Simkhovich and Kasparyan and, again, none of those published by Herbstman. This was highly paradoxical: no other chess author was more active and prolific than Alexander Herbstman in those years. Kasparyan began his career of author only after WWII and before WWII, the other great composers (Troitzky, Platov, Kubbel) published collections only of their own studies. Herbstman was also the first to have his books translated in Western Europe (in Dutch). Three years later, Herbstman had apparently been forgiven and Bondarenko was authorized to quote his name in his fourth volume, *Sovremennyy Shakhmatny Etyud* (the Modern Chess Study), even if the presentation of the composer was particularly laconic: only two short lines, without any mention of his departure from the USSR.

Herbstman's activity as a chess writer lasted till his very last days: Timothy Whitworth commissioned John Roycroft to ask Alexander Herbstman for an introduction to the first edition of his collection of Leonid Kubbel's studies. Herbstman finished his text a few days before his death, in May 1982, and it was sent, after he had passed away, by his daughter Marina.

As a composer, Herbstman was able to compose every kind of study. We find in his work a wide range of styles, from miniatures and domination studies 'à la Rinck' to romantic studies or compositions with systematic movements. The latter aspect earned him attacks from Gurvich in his essay *Chess Poetry*, published in *The Soviet Chess Study* (1955). Herbstman wrote about this topic in his 1964 collection of studies (two years after Gurvich's death). In this debate about aesthetics in studies, Herbstman's (and Korolkov's) position was, in P.S. Valois' reformulation in his

editorial to EG4 (April 1966) that 'originality of conception is perhaps the most important element in composition and that allowances must be made in other respects'. Paul Valois also quotes an article by Herbstman (*Shakhmaty v SSSR*, October 1965) in which the composer shows 'how the study art progresses and how better and more economical renderings of themes are being composed; at the same time, new ideas are constantly being introduced, and so the cycle goes on'. A dynamic conceiving, expressed with a lot of clarity!

Bibliography

Herbstman wrote 7 books about studies:

– *Shakhmatnaya Partia i Kompozitsya* (Chess Game and Composition), Moscow-Leningrad 1930 (with a preface by N. Grigoriev).

– *Shakhmatny Etyud v SSSR* (The Chess Study in the USSR), Moscow-Leningrad 1934.

– *Sovremenniy Shakhmatny Etyud* (The Modern Chess Study), Moscow-Leningrad 1937.

These three books were translated in Dutch by Gerhard Oskam (1880-1952). About these translations, see: *Endgame Study Composing in the Netherlands and Flanders*, by Jan van Reek and Henk van Donk, ARVES, 1992, pp 133-134.

– *Padenye Chernogo Korolia* (The Fall of the Black King), Alma Ata 1958.

– *Rasskazy o Bielom Slone* (Tales of the White Bishop), Moscow 1959.

– *Shakhmaty iz Berezovoi Kori (Rasskazy o Lenine)* (Birch Bark Chess - Tales on Lenin) Alma Ata 1960.

– *Izbrannyye Shakhmatnyye Etyudy* (Selected studies), Moscow 1964.

Another of his books deals with chess:

Psychoanaliz Shakhmatnoy Igri (Psychoanalysis of Chess), Moscow, Contemporary Problems Press, 1925.