

History

Herman Mattison (Hermanis Matisons, 28xii1894 – 16xi1932)

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One century ago, in July 1911, Herman Mattison's first study was published in his native town, in the newspaper *Rigasche Rundschau*. It was composed in collaboration with a certain Šaldoks whose name didn't go down to posterity (in the Lamare collection, his name is spelled Schaldakas: this written form was found in the newspaper *Bohemia*, where the study was quickly reproduced, in September 1911). In chess, as in other fields, spontaneous generation rarely occurs. If a genius of endgame composing like Mattison was born at the beginning of the XXth century, in Riga, there must be some good reasons. Concerning the history of the development of the chess study, the background story of Riga is especially interesting. For a youngster who had learnt the moves in 1901, Riga was the right place to be.

Riga has been under Russian rule since 1710, when Russia took over from Sweden. But Livonia (the former name of the part of current Latvia where Riga is located) was in fact run by a Baltic-German elite, a legacy of the Middle Ages when the whole Baltic area was a member of the Hanseatic League. Until the year 1891, the start of the russification decided by Czar Alexander III, German was the official language of the administration of the Riga governorate. By 1867, Riga's population was 42.9% German. For many Jews living in Latvia, Germany was the country they admired (it represented emancipation, as opposed to Russia) and Latvian was just a language of peasants. During the second half of the XIXth century Riga became transformed into a modern metropolis. Due to its heavy industrialization and to the quick devel-

opment of its port, the sociological composition of the town changed: many poor Latvians from the country joined the city. In 1862 its population was 102,590 and by 1897 it had reached 255,879. On the eve of WWI the town had 497,586 inhabitants.

Despite the lessening of their numerical importance, in 1912 the Baltic-Germans still held 51 of the 80 seats in the municipal council of Riga, and the mayor was... an Englishman, George Armistead. The first Russian revolution in 1905 had occasioned violent attacks against Baltic-German nobles. When in 1914 WWI broke up, many of these Baltic-German emigrated to Germany, among which were a large number of German farmers who had recently settled in the country.

In 1915, the Latvian army under Russian command, resisted the German offensive but there were heavy losses by the Latvian battalions. Riga eventually fell in August 1917 and the larger part of the country was occupied by German troops. The situation became especially confusing in the following months. The population, strongly opposed to German rule favoured the Russian Bolsheviks who took over in 1918 and in December 1918 the independent Soviet republic of Latvia was proclaimed... in Moscow! But during the winter the Bolsheviks lost all their credit and Spring saw the disintegration of the new state. In 1920, after a short war, Latvia became a true independent state, with a parliamentary democracy.

In the newly independent Latvian state, the German Baltic elite lost a lot of its political and economic power. After 1920 the German

minority quickly decreased (not more than 3.6 % of population in 1925).

So, it is no surprise that chess in Riga during the XIXth century was mainly a German matter. Let us listen to Troitzky himself, in the preface to his 1934 collection of studies: “My secondary education was at the Riga Real-schule (secondary school) where I had my first encounter with chess and draughts“. He adds: “It was only in the town’s German quarter, which lived isolated from the Russian Quarter, that there was the circle in which the Behting brothers, Amelung, and, much later, Nimzovitch, received their chess upbringing. But, despite living practically alongside this circle, I had no idea of what was happening there”. (EG119, January 1996, pp 741-2).

Some figures confirm the overwhelming domination of German culture in Riga: in 1901 the town had 23 publications in German, 9 in Latvian and 5 in Russian. There were three major daily newspapers in German: *Dü-na Zeitung* (1888-1909), *Rigaer Tageblatt* (1877-1915), a morning paper, and *Rigasche Zeitung*. All three defended a conservative point of view, as expected, since they were mainly read by the ruling class. A newcomer, the *Rigasche Rundschau* – the Riga Panorama – (1895-1915 and 1919-1939) made a name for itself under his editor-in-chief Paul Schiemann (Pauls Šīmanis in Latvian), a liberal who became the leader of the *Deutsche-Baltische Demokratische Partei* (he was a strong opponent of Nazism and had to resign in 1933 when his newspaper became pro-Nazi). It is the *Rigasche Rundschau* that took in Mattison’s first opus.

These newspapers had a chess column in which original compositions were published. Maybe the major role of these chess columns in the development of the modern chess study has not been enough emphasized. Both Mihail and Vassili Platov, who were born in Riga where their father was a merchant, published their very first study in the *Rigaer Tageblatt* (Mihail was the first on 19i1903, followed by his brother on 31viii1903). Between 1903 and 1910 (the year they left Riga for Moscow), the

Rigaer Tageblatt welcomed no less than 29 studies by the Platovs (not counting four entries to the *Rigaer Tageblatt* tournaments in 1905 and 1909). The Platovs also sent some of their original works to the *Düna Zeitung*.

Another giant of chess study composition was closely connected with Riga. In May 1905, the whole Kubbel family, coming from St Petersburg, moved to Riga. The father, Johann Kubbel (Ivan Ivanovich in Russian), was of ‘Latvian nationality’ (Vladimirov & Fokin, p. 6). In his 1940 *Shakhmaty v SSSR* article, Leonid Kubbel wrote: “I spent the summer of 1905 in Riga... While there, I got to know the chess column in the *Rigaer Tageblatt* and, before long, I sent the chess editor a small collection of problem and studies I had composed” (quoted by Timothy Withworth in the introduction of his 2004 collection of Leonid Kubbel’s studies). In February 1906, Kubbel’s father died and the family went back to St Petersburg. But Kubbel remained faithful to the *Rigaer Tageblatt* column: from 1907 to 1915, many other studies were published in the Latvian newspaper (no less than 37 in Whitworth’s collection with 4 more published in the *Rigasche Rundschau*).

These columns were the reflection of an intense chess life in the Baltic region, especially in Riga, where some interesting personalities of composition marked the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century (this article is limited to studies: of course, the name of another Riga child, the great Aron Nimzowitsch [1886-1935], deserves mention).

Friedrich Amelung (1842-1909) was a kingpin of this activity. He was the first secretary of the *Baltische Schachbund* (Baltic Chess Federation), created in 1898 in Riga. Amelung was one of the Baltic-German tenants: he was born in a manor of Livonia, Katharina, near Dorpat, today Tartu in Estonia (the Russian governorate of Livonia was divided between Latvia and Estonia). He attended Dorpat University (which then was the only university in the Baltic region) where he studied philosophy and chemistry. He was the

director of the glass and mirror factory he had inherited from his family. A strong player, he was the first editor of the famous yearbook publication *Baltische Schachblätter*, the organ of the chess federation, from 1889 to 1901. After 1901, K. Behting and P. Kerkovius took on the editorship. As a composer, Amelung was prolific and a notable analyst, who studied several pawnless endings. Some of his articles, that first appeared in the *Baltische Schachblätter*, had a larger circulation thanks to their publication in *Deutsche Schachzeitung* in 1900 and 1901. Lewis Stiller has shown the importance of Amelung's work: "Amelung's 1900 analysis of KR/KS was significant because it contained the first histogram to my knowledge of a pawnless endgame of, for that matter, of any endgame"⁽¹⁾.

Another name to be remembered is Andreas Ascharin (1843-1896), Russian by his father, Baltic-German by his mother. He was a publisher, a specialist in Russian literature, and translator from Russian to German. He settled in Riga (1879) and remained there till the end of his life. He was the chess columnist in both *Rigaer Tageblatt* and *Düna Zeitung*. He was one of the judges of the first *Rigaer Tageblatt* 1895 tourney.

The other great figures of Latvian chess were the Bething (Bētiš) brothers, very active in both game and composition (problems and studies). Like the Kubbel brothers, there were three: Johann (Jānis Karlovich; 1856-1946), Karl (Kārlis Karlovich; 1867-1943) and Robert (Roberts Karlovich; 1875- ?), all three interested in composing, even if compositions by Robert remain unknown. Johann and Karl were not very prolific but they were renowned

in European chess circles for the quality of their work.

Karl was one of the co-authors of *Sachs Latvija lidze 1940. Gadam* (*Chess in Latvia to 1940*) and, with his brother Johann, he edited a collection of their best studies and problems, in German (1930). A strong (o.t.b. and correspondence) player, he was a member of the national team in the 1924 unofficial Olympiad in Paris, as was Mattison. He was also the first theoretician of the Latvian gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Sf3 f5!?).

Finally, another name of chess composition in Latvia is Johann Sehwers, today more or less forgotten as a composer: his name is not listed in *Le nouveau guide des Echecs* by Giffard and Biénabe (Laffont 1993; second edition 2009) that contains a 'dictionary of problemists' with more than 3,500 composers. Sehwers is not among the entries in the 1990 Russian chess encyclopaedia under the direction of Anatoly Karpov. You can find him in Caputto's *El arte del Estudio* (vol 3, Buenos Aires 1996) but not in the pages devoted to Latvia since he is ranked among the German composers! But Troitzky himself said 'regained [his] former interest in composition' when in 1905 he was shown compositions by the Platovs, Rinck and Sehwers, even if he added "The majority of the compositions by the above composers restricted themselves to one and the same theme: win of a piece, domination, stalemate. In Sehwers' case indeed there was nothing else" (preface of the 1937 collection).

A lot is known about his life. Johann Sehwers (Jānis Zervers in latvian) was born in 1868 in Leimani, a small village that is located today in Estonia but that was in Livonia, in the

(1) Lewis Stiller also quotes the work made by another minor figure of chess, Theodor Molien (1861-1941). He writes about him: "Even more intriguing, however, is Amelung's comment that an even earlier, exact, numerical analysis containing the number of win-in- k moves for each k of a four-piece chess endgame was known, and was due to Dr. Th. Mollien, 'der Mathematiker von Fach ist'; that is, to the professor Th. Mollien". Molien (also known as Molin) was born in Riga in a family of Swedish decent. Despite the high value of his work as a researcher (algebra), this mathematician of the higher order had to take a full professor position in Siberia. In 1900, he left Dorpat for the Tomsk Technological Institute before joining, in 1917, the newly opened Tomsk University. A friend of Amelung, Molien showed great interest in chess, especially in theoretical studies. He published only four studies and it seems that, once in western Siberia, he gave up chess.

XIXth century. Under Russian rule, the administrative organization of the present Baltic states was very different: the governorate of Livonia (formerly governorate of Riga) was divided in 9 districts, among which was the Werro district (today the Estonian Voru county) where Leimani is. Sehwers decided to go into teaching. His progress in that career was very slow: he was first a schoolmaster and learned the moves when attending the teachers' training college in Dorpat. In 1890, he settled in Port-Kunda where he found a position in a private school. In 1902, he resumed studies in Pernau (today Pärnu, Estonia) where he graduated as a teacher of German in secondary schools. Three years later, he was sent to Archangelsk (Russia), on the White Sea, where he taught in the Lomonossov-Gymnasium as a member of the Russian civil service. In 1910, he began to work on a dissertation that led him to Zurich University. Six years later, he defended his doctoral thesis. After WWI, he was appointed director of the teachers' training school in Mitau (Jelgava, Latvia) and later, he settled in Germany. Nevertheless, he was the president of the *Latvian Literary Society* from 1925 to 1940.

In 1936, in Leipzig, an expanded and amended version of his thesis was published (with a second edition in 1953). Sehwers was a renowned philologist. His field of research was the influence of German language in Latvian. A review of the expanded version of his thesis presents his work as "single-mindedly devoted to the study of loan-words and calques from Low and High German in his mother tongue". The list of his writings contains no less than 38 items between 1918 and 1935. In a review of his last book, we read that his death occurred during WWII "as an exile in Berlin". Several sources give Poznan as the place where he died in November 1940. It seems that his last monograph about calques (*Lehnübersetzungn* in German) that was lost during WWII.

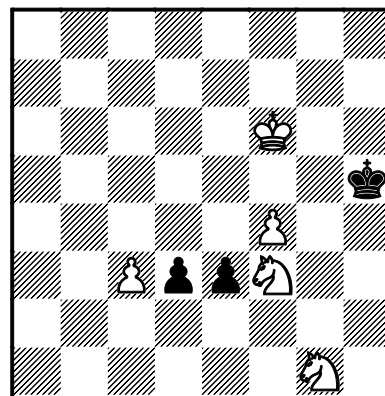
There is no trace of his activity as a chess player, excepted a 4/5th place in the second

section of the 1899 Riga Baltic congress. The previous year, Sehwers had been impressed by a study by J. Behting and he had begun to compose himself. He didn't choose a Riga newspaper for his first published study (1898) but the *St Petersburg Zeitung*. In 1905 he had his greatest success when he won first and second prizes in the second *Rigaer Tageblatt* tourney, ahead of V. Platov, Blathy, Rinck and M. Platov. In the 1909 *Rigaer Tageblatt* tourney (in which the Platovs won 1st and 2nd prizes), he entered three studies: only one received a 3rd honourable mention. With the exception of an entry in the *La Stratégie* 1902 tourney (and a late appearance in the *Rigasche Rundschau* 1934 tourney) it seems that he never took part to any other tourney. After 1910, he concentrated on a collection of his own studies that was published in Germany (*Endspielstudien*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1922). After 1922, it seems that was less interested in studies. But, at almost seventy, he had two original studies published in the Lommer and Sutherland anthology *1234 Modern End-Game Studies* (1937).

With such a concentration of talents in one country (even if Latvia was not independent before 1920, there was a strong national feeling), a teenager desirous of launching into composing could not hope for a better background!

(to be continued)

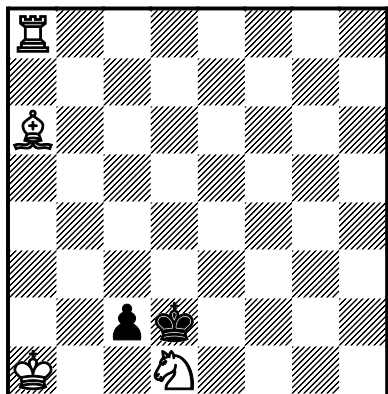
P.1. H. Mattison and S. Šaldoks
Rigasche Rundschau 9vii1911



f6h5 0002.22 5/3 Win

1.Se2! d2 2.Sxd2 exd2 3.Sg3+ Kh4 (Kg4 4.Se4 d1Q 5.Sf2+) 4.Sf5+ Kg4 5.Se3+ Kxf4 6.Sd1 Ke4 7.Sb2 wins.

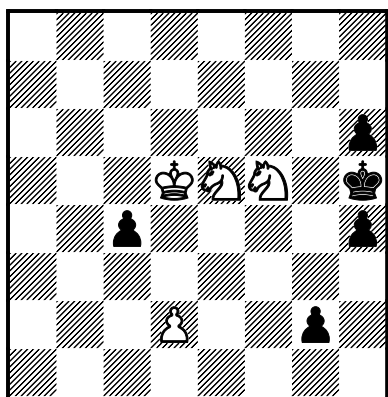
P.2. F. Amelung and K. Behting
Rigasche Rundschau 24iii1907



a1d2 0111.01 4/2 Win

1.Rd8+ Ke1 2.Re8+ Kd2 3.Sc3! c1Q+ 4.Sb1+ Kd1 5.Rd8+ Ke1 6.Rf8! wins.

P.3. K. Behting
2nd-5th prize *Bohemia* 1906



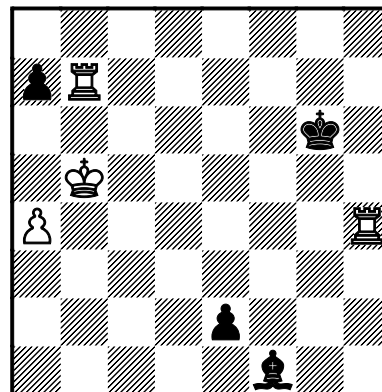
d5h5 0002.14 4/5 Draw

1.Kc6! g1Q (1...h3 2.Sg3+ Kh4 3.Se2 h2 4.Sf3+ Kh3 5.Sxh2 Kxh2 6.Kc5) 2. Sxh4

P.4. J. Sehwers

2nd honourable mention

Rigaer Tageblatt 1909



b5g6 0230.12 4/4 Draw

1.Rg4+ Kh5 2.Rh4+ Kg5 3.Rg4+ Kf5 4.Rf4+! Kxf4 5.Ka5! e1Q+ 6.Rb4+ K- stalemate.

Sources

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