



Herman Mattison (Hermanis Matisons, 28xii1894 – 16xi1932) (part 2)

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Thanks to his career as a chess player at a high level, we know a little more about Mattison's short life than we know about many other composers who lived at the same period⁽¹⁾. A few years after his death, a book about chess in Latvia, *Šachs Latvijā līdz 1940. gadam*, written by K. Bētiņš, A. Kalniņš and V. Petrovs was published in Riga (1940): it contains most of the information known about him, even if it remains very incomplete. Composer-players like Réti, Selesniev and Mattison also seem more familiar to us because we have seen photographs and pictures of them⁽²⁾ (note 2).

Here is the outline of Mattison's short life: he was born in Riga, where his father, born in a family of land farmers, had come to work. When his father died, Herman was only 15. The teenager had to leave high school and to "join a firm as a trainee in its office" (V. Kirilovs, Riga 1994, translated by T. Whit-

worth). Kirilovs adds: "Subsequently, Mattison turned to chess journalism, which became the chief source of his livelihood". During WWI he was a soldier and was wounded in 1917: he had to be treated in Russia (Soviet Union) during a long time, apparently 15 months (6 in Petrograd, now Sankt-Petersburg, and 9 months in Moscow for his convalescence). His activity as a chess player before his win in the first 1924 Latvian congress in Riga remains unknown (the 1940 Latvian book just mentions wins in other tournaments in Latvia from 1920 to 1923: "the Riga chess club championship in 1921 and 1923, as well as club tournaments in 1920, 1921 and 1922"). In 1924, Mattison won in Paris the so-called 'World Amateur Championship' that was held just before the foundation of FIDE, ahead of his compatriot Fricis Apšenieks (F. Apscheneek, 1894-1941) and Edgard Colle (1897-1932), the master from Belgium who could have won the event if he had been

(1) According to Arpad Elo (*The Rating of Chess Players, Past and Present*, 1978), Mattison's historical elo is reckoned to be about 2510 – to be compared with Réti and Selesniev, respectively 2550 and 2470. Jeff Sonas' *Chessmetrics* give different figures: for him, Mattison's highest rating reached 2631 (in September 1929), to be compared with Réti's and Selesniev's highest performances, respectively, 2710 and 2619.

(2) The well-known 1924 photograph of Mattison with his signature (reproduced in the second edition of Timothy Whithworth's monography, but for those who don't own this book, it can also be seen for instance on the Russian *Wikipedia* page devoted to Mattison). Another famous picture, reproduced several times, was on the front page of the very first issue of Belgian magazine *L'Echiquier* (January 1925): it was taken during the decisive game Colle-Mattison in Paris, 1924. It is reproduced, for instance, on the following webpage: <http://www.chessbase.de/nachrichten.asp?newsid=7377>

A less known group photograph with Treybal, Przepiorka and Euwe (against whom Herman Mattison is playing) illustrates p 403 of *El Ajedrez Americano*, October 1928. It has been reproduced by Edward Winter and can be seen in his *Chessnotes* where it is no.5637 (27vi2008): browse <http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/archives.html>.

Mattison's obituary in *Jaunākās Ziņas* was illustrated by three other photographs, among which one represents Mattison as a child when he was a pupil in the gymnasium, and one shows him as a soldier.

able to defeat Mattison in the last round, who was defending a lost endgame (individual results were added up to produce a ranking per nations: Czechoslovakia won the contest. Latvia had only three players, instead of four in most of the other teams: with a fourth competitor, no doubt that the country would have finished at first place). Later, Mattison took part to a few international tournaments. He took part in no Latvian championship after 1924. But he was rarely invited in major tournaments and played in no more than two or three tournaments per year till his death (sometimes even fewer: for instance in 1927 not a single tournament). A player like Richard Réti sometimes took part in nine grandmaster tournaments per year. Maybe Mattison's bad health was the reason for his rare appearances in tournaments: he died from pulmonary tuberculosis in 1932 (a 'long illness' in the Latvian 1940 book). His last great successes were his famous games won against Alekhine and Rubinstein during the 1931 Prague Olympiad.

Most of Mattison's studies were published in local or national newspapers: only a small percentage was sent abroad in tourneys organised by chess magazines. Before WWI, his studies appeared in Riga, with the exception of a handful published in Germany (*Deutsches Wochenschach*) during WWI. This relationship between Mattison and the Latvian press was interesting: Kirilovs (see the quotation above) writes that "subsequently [but when?] Mattison turned to chess journalism". In an article about chess study composition during WWI, (http://www.chesspro.ru/_events/2010/tkachenko.html), S.N. Tkachenko also writes that Mattison chose "the difficult path of chess professionalism, combining participations in tournaments with the job of chess journalist. Alas, the WWI amended a lot the young professional player's life" (translation by S. Didukh) from the following Russian text: "выбирает нелегкий путь шахматного профессионала, совмещающая участия в турнирах с работой шахматного журналиста. Увы, первая

мировая война внесла большие коррективы в жизнь молодого профи ..."). This is surprising. Does it mean that the young Mattison, at 19, was already a chess journalist, for instance for the *Rigaer Tageblatt* or the *Rigasche Rundschau*? Probably not. But his intention of living for chess was already strong.

By chance, I have been able to find a trace of his activity as a chess journalist in a Latvian daily newspaper. In January 2011, HH, in his editorial for EG183, reported that he had unearthed the digitized version of the Czech newspaper *Bohemia*, with its famous chess column. At the same time, I discovered the full digitized collection of the Latvian newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas*. Each of its issues, from 1911 to 1940, can be downloaded from the website: http://data.lnb.lv/digitala_biblioteka/laikraksti/JaunakasZinas/index.htm

Before discovering this collection, I had no idea of what kind of newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas* was, in which Mattison published no less than 7 original studies from 1927 till 1930. Of course, I can't decipher the Latvian language, especially when it is written with gothic letters, but it is quite easy to recognize a chess column (especially with a diagram!).

The history of this newspaper is quite interesting. *Jaunākās Ziņas* (*The Latest News*) was the fruit of the association of two brilliant minds: Anton Benjamiņš (1860-1939), a journalist who had worked as a reporter for the *Rigaer Tageblatt* and Emīlija Elks, born Simsonē (1881-1941) who was at the same time an advertising agent and a theatre critical for the same *Rigaer Tageblatt*. They met in 1904 or 1905 and quickly joined together, both in their private life and their professional career. Their team was efficient (practically, they were running the *Rigaer Tageblatt*) but their wish was to promote a newspaper in the Latvian language. With their enterprising mind, they succeeded in founding their own daily paper. She was the publisher, he was the editor-in-chief. At the beginning, in 1911, *Jaunākās Ziņas* was a modest newspaper, with no more than 8 pages, selling fewer than

10,000 copies, but Anton and Emīlija quickly attracted good Latvian speaking journalists who worked for other (Russian and German) newspapers; after WWI, during which they had to cease publication of *Jaunākās Ziņas*, the German intellectual predominance quickly lost ground and *Jaunākās Ziņas* quickly became, after Latvia's independence in 1920, number one Latvian newspapers (the Benjamiņš were lucky, since, after a short period abroad during WWI, they could recover their premises with the printing material, left by Russians with tons of paper allowing them to publish *Jaunākās Ziņas* for free for a whole year!). In 1939-40, they were selling more than 210,000 copies, a remarkable achievement for a small country like Latvia. Emīlija Benjamiņa was one of the richest people in Latvia, nicknamed the 'Press Queen'. But the fall was to come quickly. *Jaunākās Ziņas* expressed a liberal democratic theme and couldn't be suspected of any weakness towards totalitarianism. Anton Benjamiņš died just before the outbreak of WWII and Emīlija refused to leave Latvia under the protection of the Nazis. On 17 June 1940, the Soviet invaded Latvia and incorporated it into the Soviet Union: there was no more space for *Jaunākās Ziņas* whose last issue was published on 9 August 1940: Benjamiņš properties were nationalized. Emīlija died of starvation in a Soviet camp, near Perm.

Jaunākās Ziņas, as a general-interest newspaper, had little space for sports or chess but, nevertheless, from time to time, an article with chess results appeared. Mattison seems to have been in charge of the chess column in *Jaunākās Ziņas* from 1927.

The first column where his name appears (with his personal address, *Jauneela 4, dj 9, Riga*, given for solvers) is dated 26iii1927⁽¹⁾.

A good example of a rich column can be found some days later in *Jaunākās Ziņas* no.75 (2iv1927): it contains no less than a commented game (Nimzowitsch-Alekhine, New York 1927), a pawn study by A.V. Kovalenko, reproduced from *Shakhmatny Listok*, some announcements of international tournaments, the results, with the round-robin table, of the Latvian university tourney (won by young hope Vladimir Petrovs) and the results of simultaneous displays by his colleague Apšenieks. But most of the columns were printed without Mattison's name: only those presenting a composition for solving were 'signed', with Mattison's own address. The other, around fifty in 1927, were only news in brief – the shortest had only 3 lines!

On the whole, 'rich' columns were quite rare and their publication was not regular. But the most interesting feature is that Mattison chose to publish compositions in his column, including some original studies: within one month or so, he had already published no less than three originals (numbered 1, 3 and 5). The rhythm faded but nevertheless, by the end of 1927, 23 compositions (most of them studies, among which four originals by Mattison, but also some problems) had been presented in *Jaunākās Ziņas*. As far as studies were concerned, several were reproduced from *Shakhmatny Listok*, but there were also some oddities, like a little known 1927 study by F. Lazard, taken from *Kagans Neueste Schachnachrichten*.

In 1927 Mattison didn't take part to any chess tournament. After this year, when he resumed competition as a chess player, maybe he had less time for chess journalism and his columns became scarce. Maybe, after one year of enthusiasm, he was disappointed by the lack of participation by readers/solvers?

(1) Mattison had no monopoly on the chess column in *Jaunākās Ziņas*. In 1924, for instance, the editor of *Jaunākās Ziņas* chess column was ... Fricis Apšenieks, who reported the great Latvian success in Paris. In the very first issue of a Latvian chess magazine, *Latvijas Sacha Vetnesis* (in German: *Lettlandische Schachzeitung*), in December 1924, whose 'responsible editor' was Otto Tideman (Tiedemann), a text entitled 'Ievadam' (Introduction) was also signed Fricis Apsenieks. Mattison also contributed to this first issue of *Latvijas Sacha Vetnesis* but only as a composer: he offered an original study (that was reproduced on the front page) and also an original more-mover problem composed with Kārlis Betinš (Karl Behting).

Three other original studies were published in the newspaper one in 1928, one in 1929 and the last in 1930, again with Mattison's personal address. It should be noted that, as with the fourth of the 1927 studies, the three that followed were all published at the end of December, as a kind of Christmas gift for readers.

Of course, a full search should be made in *Jaunākās Ziņas*: for this article through lack of time not all issues of *Jaunākās Ziņas* have been perused. Other discoveries are possible. There were also other publications in Latvia that welcomed original compositions by Mattison. For instance, in November 1924, the Benjamiņš created *Atpūta* (*Leisure*), a weekly illustrated magazine. Two original studies by HM were published there in 1930 and 1932. The *Jaunākās Ziņas* article about Mattison's funeral mentions that he was also the chess editor for this publication. Finally, *Ilustrets Schurnals* (or *Žurnāls*), *Latvis* are other post-WWI publications about which very little is known.

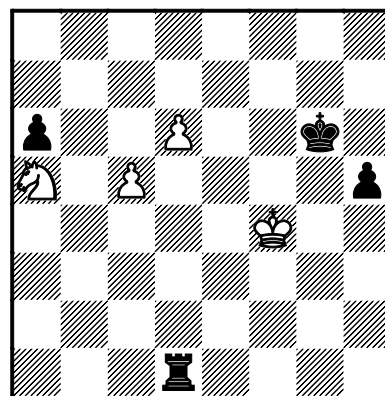
When he died in 1932, of course, there were announcements of his death in *Jaunākās Ziņas* (two on 17xi1932, by the Latvian chess federation and the 'senioru klubs'), preceded by an obituary (on 16xi1932, i.e. the same day Mattison died) and an article about his funeral (on 21xi1932).

Today, it is strange to think that the most famous study 'composer' from Latvia is a certain A. Strebkovs... What a pity when you remember how brilliant the chess past of this country is!

(P.1.) 1.c6 (Ke5? h4;) **Rxd6 2.c7 Rf6+ 3.Ke3** (3.Ke5? Rf5+ 4.Kd6 Rf6+ 5.Kc5 Rf8 6.Sc6 Kh7 7.Sd8 Rf1 8.Sc6 Rf8; 3.Kg3? Rf8 4.Sc6 h4+ 5.Kg4 h3 draws) **Re6+ 4.Kf2** (4.Kd4 (Kd3, Kd2)? Re8 5.Sc6 Kf6 6.Sd8 Ke7) **Rf6+ 5.Kg1** (5.Kg2? Rf8 6.Sc6 h4 7.Sd8 h3+ 8.Kg3 h2 draws) **Rf8 6.Sc6 Re8 7.Kf2 Rf8+ 8.Ke3 Re8+ 9.Kf4 Rf8+ 10.Ke5 Re8+ 11.Kd6 Kf6 12.Sd8 Re1 13.c8Q Rd1+ 14.Kc7 Rc1+ 15.Sc6** wins.

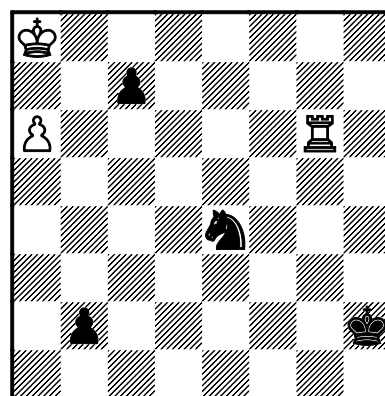
(P.2.) 1.a6 Kh1 (b1Q 2.Rg2+ leads to stalemate; Sd6 2.Rh6+ Kg2 3.Rg6+ Kf2

P.1. Herman Mattison
Jaunākās Ziņas 26iii1927



f4g6 0301.22 4/4 Win

P.2. Herman Mattison
Jaunākās Ziņas # 291, 23 xii 1930



a8g2 0103.12 3/4 Draw

4.Rf6+ Ke2 5.Re6+ Kd2 and e.g. 6.Rh6 b1Q 7.Rxd6+ Ke3 8.Rc6 draws) **2.Rg3 b1Q** (Sxg3 3.Kb8 b1Q 4.Kxc7 draws) **3.Rb3 Qc2 (Qa2) 4.Rb1+ K- 5.Rb2(+) Qxb2** stalemate.

Appendix

In 1924, during his stay in Paris where he was playing the 'tournoi international d'amateurs à l'occasion de la VIIIe Olympiade' (considered as the first unofficial chess olympiad), Herman Mattison met Marcel Lamare (for information about this gentleman, see my article 'The studies collection of Marcel Lamare (1856-1937)' in *EGI2I*, July 1996. He gave him three studies he had recently composed: three diagrammed cards in Lamare's collection have the same comment: 'communiquée par l'auteur le 15 juillet 1924'.

Among the Lamare papers, I also found a small sheet with the handwritten positions,

without diagrams, of these three studies ([+0011.12c2e6] and [+0310.22d5b4], both published in *Latvis*, in 1923, and a third one [=3344.20 e8g7], composed with Kārlis Bētiš (K. Behting), and published in *Ilustrets Schurnals* (*Žurnāls*), in 1924. Lamare's handwriting is easily recognizable but below the position of pieces, another handwriting can be distinguished (see document). Apparently, it is the same handwriting than the one that ap-

pears on the most famous of Mattison's photographs.

Special thanks to Timothy Whitworth and Sergiy Didukh.

Erratum: in EG181 (July 2010), I wrongly gave the 20iii1883 date of birth: Frédéric Lazard, as Rainer Staudte pointed it out almost immediately, was born on 20ii1883. I apologize for that mistake.

