

# A Nimzowitsch Story

Edward Winter



Woodcut of Aron Nimzowitsch by Erwin Voellmy (*Schweizerische Schachzeitung*, September 1929, page 138)

Page 138 of *Schach 2000 Jahre Spiel-Geschichte*

by R. Finkenzeller, W. Ziehr and E.

Bührer (Stuttgart, 1989) ascribed to Tartakower a remark quoted as '*Eine Drohung ist stärker als*

*eine Ausführung*'. In the English-language edition (London, 1990) that came out lumberingly as 'A threat is more effective than the actual implementation', whereas the usual rendering is 'The threat is stronger than the execution'. Moreover, Nimzowitsch, rather than Tartakower, is customarily named as the coiner of the phrase, with everything tied into the famous 'smoking threat' anecdote.

On page 191 of the July 1953 *CHESS* M. Lipton pointed out two contradictory versions of the story of Nimzowitsch complaining that his opponent was threatening to smoke. On pages 31-32 of *Chess for Fun & Chess*

for Blood (Philadelphia, 1942) Edward Lasker asserted that the incident, involving a cigar, had occurred 'in an offhand game between Nimzowitsch and Emanuel Lasker in Berlin' (although there was still, according to Edward Lasker's account, an umpire to whom Nimzowitsch could protest). On page 128 of *The World*

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*Great Chess Games*

(New York, 1951) Reuben Fine

stated that the scene had been New York, 1927, and that Nimzowitsch complained to the

tournament director, Maróczy, when Vidmar 'absent-mindedly took out his cigarette case'.

New York, 1927 was also given as the venue by Irving Chernev ('This is the way I heard it back in 1927, when it occurred') on pages 15-16 of *The Bright Side of Chess* (Philadelphia, 1948). Nimzowitsch, we are told, complained to the tournament committee that Vidmar looked as if he wanted to smoke a cigar, but Chernev mentioned no remark about the threat being stronger than the execution.

It is not possible to say when the story first appeared in print. After Alfred Brinckmann had related it in *Deutsche Schachblätter* in 1932, the *BCM* (page 307 of the July 1932 issue) accorded it 16 lines, stating that Nimzowitsch's objection to tobacco smoke was well known but that 'A. Brinckmann tells what is to us a new story in this connection'. According to the Brinckmann version (New York, 1927, Vidmar, cigars), the Nimzowitsch punchline to the unnamed tournament director was 'No, but he is threatening to smoke, and as an old player you must know that the threat is stronger than the execution'.

On page 158 of the May 1954 *BCM* D.J. Morgan stated regarding the Nimzowitsch story:

'The original version in the *Evening Standard* was contributed by its then chess editor, H. Meek, and we have our friend Mr Meek's authority for saying that he received the story by word of mouth from Maróczy, the controller of the tournament in question (New York, 1927).'

None of this explains why Tartakower's name has been seen or, indeed, when the epigram first evolved. All we can say for now is that in 1932 Tartakower contributed a two-part article on the subject of threats to *Les Cahiers de l'Echiquier Français* and that in the second part (issue 28, page 373) he wrote:

' Pour conclure,  
invitons le lecteur à  
réfléchir sur les  
considérations  
suivantes:

1. Puisque  
est plus forte que  
l'exécution  
pas paradoxal de  
prétendre qu  
plus fort de ne pas  
user de la menace.  
Qu'on appelle cette  
stratégie  
" louvoisement  
positionnel  
" stratégie d  
c'est une façon de  
jouer qui est très  
pratiquée dans les

" la menace  
" , il n'est  
' il est  
" , " jeu  
" ou  
' attente " ,

*grands tournois et qui  
donne souvent de bons  
résultats, car il peut  
en résulter chez  
l'adversaire une  
moindre vigilance. Elle  
peut, en outre, lui  
faire perdre patience  
et le pousser à  
s'élançer dans une  
attaque prématurée.*

How far back is it possible to trace the 'threat/execution' remark, in the writings of Tartakower, Nimzowitsch or anybody else? And did Maróczy ever pen an account of any such Nimzowitsch incident at New York, 1927?

(3197)

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From Per Skjoldager (Fredericia, Denmark):

*The only example I can  
find of Nimzowitsch  
using the phrase about  
the threat being  
stronger than the  
execution is on page  
137 of the 9/1933  
issue of the Danish  
magazine  
annotated his game  
against I.E.W. Gemzøe  
(who was Black) from  
that year  
training tournament in  
Copenhagen:*

*Skakbladet, where he*

*'s Politiken*



Black played 20  
and Nimzowitsch wrote:

... Qe7,

'This retreat by the strongly-posted queen is an excellent move. The pawn at e5 is now heading for its sad fate. It should be noted that Black has continually operated with the threat of ...Qxa2 without executing it (the modern doctrine, which says that the threat is stronger than the execution).'

For reference, his  
original Danish text  
reads:

"Dette tilbagetog af den stærkt posterede dronning er et fortrinligt træk: Be5 går nu sin triste skæbne i møde. Læg mærke til, at sort bestandig har opereret med truslen Dxa2 uden dog at udføre den (den moderne lærdom, der siger, at truslen er stærkere end udførelsen)."

(3200)

Despite Nimzowitsch's well-known dislike of tobacco, page 87 of *Visiting Mrs Nabokov* by Martin Amis (London, 1993) affirmed that 'Nimzowitsch used to smoke an especially noxious cigar'.

We have now found a much older and more extensive version of the alleged Nimzowitsch observation discussed in C.N.s 3197 and 3200. From pages xiv-xv of *Chess Openings* by James Mason (London, 1897):

'A threat or menace of exchange, or of occupation of some important point, is often far more effective than its actual execution. For example, in the Ruy López impending BxKt causes the

defender much uneasiness. He is, to some extent, obliged to confound the possible with the probable; while yet at the same time in serious doubt as to what may really happen.

Consequently, when you are attacking a piece or pawn that will keep; when you cannot be prevented from occupying some point of vantage, from which your adversary may be anxious to dislodge you; when you can check now or later, with at least equal effect; in these and all such circumstances – be cautious. *Do not play a good move too soon*

. For when you do play it, the worst of it becomes known to your antagonist, who, then free from all doubt or apprehension as to its future happening, is enabled to order his attack or defence accordingly. Therefore reserve it reasonably, thus stretching him on the rack of expectation, while you calmly proceed in development, or otherwise advance the general interests of your position.'

(3257)

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Relating the Nimzowitsch anti-smoking anecdote on pages 104-105 of their book *Chess Panorama* (Radnor, 1975), W. Lombardy and D. Daniels presented the punch-line as follows:

"I know", Nimzowitsch replied, "but he *threatens* to smoke, and you know as well as I that in chess the threat is often stronger than the execution". (This was one of the basic principles elaborated in Nimzowitsch's brilliant work *My System* .)'

In fact, the only instance found so far of Nimzowitsch putting forward this principle was in a 1933 magazine article (see C.N. 3200).

C.N. 3257 referred to an 1897 book by James Mason which contained the concept ('A threat or menace of exchange, or of occupation of some important point, is often far more effective than its actual execution'), but now Peter Anderberg (Harmstorf, Germany) points out to us that according to Georg Marco (on page 111 of the March-April 1908 *Wiener Schachzeitung* ) the principle had long been followed by instinct but was first formulated by Karl Eisenbach (1836-1894). This claim came at the end of the annotated game Lasker v Napier, Cambridge Springs, 1904:

' *Lasker folgte dabei dem längst instinktiv befolgten, aber erst von Karl Eisenbach formulierten Prinzip:*  
" *Die Drohung ist stärker als die Ausführung*

" . . . '

A footnote described Eisenbach as one of the deepest chess thinkers:  
'*Sekretär der Wiener*

*Schachgesellschaft, einer  
der gründlichsten  
Schachdenker,*

† 1894

'.

(3360)

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In a list of 'maxims and advice' on page 229 of *A Breviary of Chess* (London, 1937) Tartakower included 'A threat is more powerful than its execution', and attributed it to Tarrasch.

(4328)

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From Bernd Graefrath (Mülheim/Ruhr, Germany):

' [C.N. 3360 above] gives a  
quotation from page  
111 of the March-  
April 1908  
which claimed that  
Eisenbach] had formulated the  
principle about the  
threat being stronger  
than the execution. I  
would add that the  
point was made again  
on page 151 of the  
May-June 1908 issue:

Wiener Schachzeitung

[Karl

"Wichtiger als die vorgeführten Details ist aber die Tatsache, daß auch hier das Eisenbachsche Prinzip sich bewährt: 'Die Drohung ist oft stärker als die Ausführung.'"

(4366)

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Now we note that in *CHESS*, 30 September 1963 ('page 400', but in fact page 12) Salo Flohr brought in a different name:

'I remember an incident involving Grandmaster Nimzowitsch. He couldn't bear tobacco smoke, and in one tournament he set as a condition that his opponent should not smoke.'

His rivals agreed. When Bogoljubow put a full box of cigars on the table before sitting down to play against him, he hurried to the chief umpire in great excitement.

The umpire checked up and said, "But Bogoljubow isn't smoking".

"I know he isn't", Nimzowitsch fumed, "but he threatens to do so, and the threat in chess is more powerful than the execution."

Flohr was not necessarily claiming to have been an eye-witness, but it may be recalled that the incident is usually placed at New York, 1927, where neither Bogoljubow nor Lasker participated.

(4496)

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From Joost van Winsen (Silvolde, the Netherlands):

*The story was also told by Gerard Oskam on page 41 of February 1951. He wrote that Aron Nimzowitsch set the condition that there should be no smoking by his opponents, who included H. Weenink (1892-1931). Oskam stated that the incident occurred before the game between Nimzowitsch and Tartakower, and he reproduced dialogue allegedly exchanged between the two masters.*

Schaakmat,

*There are, though, problems with Oskam story. He said that it happened in Liège in 1923, but no such tournament took place. Nimzowitsch, Tartakower and Weenink did participate in Liège, 1930, but Oskam*

' s

stated that it took  
Nimzowitsch 35  
minutes to make his  
first move, 1 e4; at  
Liège, 1930  
Nimzowitsch was Black  
against Tartakower,  
in a Caro-Kann  
Defence which was  
drawn after 20  
moves. In fact,  
Oskam 's article  
indicated that  
Tartakower was not a  
smoker, which is  
corroborated by Kmoch  
and Reinfeld 's list  
quoted on page 235  
of A Chess Omnibus.

Vidmar discussed his  
own cigar-smoking  
habits (including a  
story involving  
Tartakower at London,  
1922) on page 114  
of his memoirs  
(Berlin, 1961).

Goldene Schachzeiten

The smoking anecdote was also related by G. Koltanowski on pages 441-442 of *CHESS*, 14 August 1936. He called it 'an old but very good story' which had occurred 'years ago' in 'a double round tournament' and he spread out the action, involving Nimzowitsch and Vidmar (plus pipe), over the two rounds in which they faced each other. Nimzowitsch was stated to have complained to Maróczy, the tournament director. That suggests New York, 1927, except that it was not 'a double round tournament'. As so often, Koltanowski purported to present the actual words spoken by the protagonists, but when he related the story again on page 13 of his 1968 book *TV Chess*, the actual words were altogether different.

(4505)

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