

# Chess and Jews

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We have compiled a non-exhaustive list of magazine items (pre-Second World War) on chess and Jews:

- In his ‘Personal and General’ column on page 264 of the *International Chess Magazine*, September 1891 Steinitz gave from his New York *Tribune* column of 6 December [*sic*] 1891 a rebuttal (received from Chigorin) of allegations that anti-Semitism was rife in the St Petersburg Chess Club.
- ‘The Jewish National Game’ on page 163 of the March 1905 *American Chess Bulletin* quoted from the *New Era Illustrated Magazine*:

‘If there is such a thing among the Jews as a “National game”, surely that title belongs by overwhelming right to the royal game of chess. The peculiar charm of chess, which affords entertainment at the same time that it instructs, has appealed from time immemorial to the race. Chess is more than a mere game, and those who “play” at it are known to the really expert as “woodshifters”. The masters have raised it to the dignity of a study, and many there are who regard it as equal with the arts and sciences. For upward of 50 years there has not been a tournament of any account in Europe or America that has not had a Jew taking a prominent part therein, and today, as has been the case often [*sic*] before, the world’s champion is one of them.’

After listing various Jewish chess figures, the item concluded:

‘All these form a goodly company, who, were it possible to array them side by side, could easily sweep from the field any team of equal numbers composed of all other nationalities. What more indeed could be said in support of the claim that in the world of chess the Jew reigns supreme?’

- A 'Chess Chat' item on page 323 of the *Chess Amateur*, August 1908:

“I have often been struck with the ubiquity of the Jewish chessplayer”, writes Mr A. Porter, in the *American Hebrew*. “I once saw in a café in Tunis two well-to-do Jews playing a game that would have done credit to the leading players of New York or London; in going through the steerage of a North-German Lloyd liner, westward bound from Bremen, I noticed three games by German Jews in progress, and on a summer’s day at the Delaware Water Gap, on reaching the top of Mount Minsi, expecting to be the monarch of all I surveyed, I found the summit already occupied by two young Jewesses engaged in mimic warfare on the chess board.”

- ‘Dr Hermann Adler and Steinitz’, on page 367 of the *Chess Amateur*, September 1911:

‘Mr Sharp, chess editor of the *Reading Observer*, gives a very interesting account of the connection of the late Dr Hermann Adler (Chief Rabbi) with chess. In his younger days, in common with so many learned Jews, he was very fond of chess. Lasker, of course, it is well known, is a Jew, and that great man Steinitz was of the same persuasion. Wilhelm Steinitz once expressed the opinion that the reason why Jews are so clever at chess is because of their patience, pure breeding, and good nature. Having been the most persecuted race in the world, they have had the least power to do harm, and have become the best natured of all peoples. Their religion, also, is a factor which contributes in the same direction, because it is combined with persecution to preserve their morals and good nature. Then the purity of their breed, as Steinitz asserted, largely helps the Jews in every walk of life, and contributes to their remarkable success, even in the science of chess ...’

More particulars are sought on the above statements by Steinitz.

- From a report about the Carlsbad, 1911 tournament on page 369 of the October 1911 *BCM*:

‘It is a curious fact that of the 26 competitors no less than half were Jews. The rivalry on strictly logical lines characterizing the game of chess, and the scope for ingenuity it affords make, we fancy, a special appeal to the Jewish temperament. Anyway, in a considerable experience we hardly remember to have met a single individual of that race who did not display at least some intelligent appreciation of the game.’

- The *Chess Amateur*, October 1911, page 392, commented: ‘Exactly half of the competitors in the Carlsbad Congress are Jews, viz. Alapin, Chajes, Cohn, Jaffe, Levenfish, Nimzowisch, Rabinovich, Rotlewi, Rubinstein, Perlis, Salwe, Spielmann and Tartakower.’
- ‘Chess and the Jews’ on pages 262-263 of the September 1918 *BCM* quoted from an ‘interesting and suggestive’ article by M.A. Geoffroy-Dausay (a pseudonym of Alphonse Goetz) entitled ‘The Parallel Progress of Chess and Civilization’, in *L’Eco degli Scacchi*:

‘Since chess entered upon its third period of splendour, the period in which we actually are, the Israelitish element has exercised a predominance out of all proportion to the number and position of the Jews.

The branches of activity are well known in which the Israelites have excelled for so long, and, as it were, by the force of atavism – banking, business, industry. In chess their supremacy began to manifest itself scarcely two generations ago. It has not ceased to grow stronger and stronger since then.

If this fact has a meaning from the point of view of culture, it must be this, that the nineteenth century is the century of the emancipation of the Jews.

When we apply our observations to Russian affairs, we see the latter suddenly made clear in a blinding flash of light. The expansion, the formidable development of Russian chess, is more or less confined to the short space of time between 1904-1918; the period in which the Judaeo-Russian masters affirmed themselves victoriously, the period of the tournament triumphs of

Rubinstein - the same Rubinstein who used to conduct in his native town of Lodz a chess column in a little Yiddish paper, printed in Hebrew characters.

The dates mentioned are those of the two Russian revolutions, the first of which, as we know, was averted, while the second succeeded completely. If it brought to the Allies the cruellest surprise and deception, on the other hand it procured for the Russian Jews their absolute emancipation, if not power. Yiddish has henceforward become an officially-recognized language, and the German philologists, who up to now have neglected and despised this idiom, are devoting themselves to it with fervour.

So the evolution of chess proceeds equally with the formidable Messianic movement which has been manifesting itself for some decades in the Jewish people, and is now crowned by the hope of seeing the ancient kingdom of Israel re-established in the land once flowing with milk and honey. I can foresee, in the not very distant future, the great world's championship tournament being held in Jerusalem.

I trust that a Gentile will be pardoned for thus pointing out the meaning of the development of chess among the Jews. The question whether this development is favourable to our game or not is quite immaterial. The phenomenon exists, plain and indisputable. Philosemitism, Antisemitism, Indifferentism have no existence in face of the reality of things. It is a curious and significant fact that chess, which in its early form, at the dawn of the Middle Ages, was brought to its height by the genius of the Semitic race, has in its modern form been actually carried to perfection again by the genius of the same race.'

- Page 86 of the March 1919 *BCM* carried J. du Mont's response to the above item:

'I presume it relates more particularly to chess professionals. In this country, at any rate, it does not

seem to me that the Jews hold rank amongst first-class amateurs in proportion to their numbers. In London there are very few if any of the class of R.C. Griffith, G. A. Thomas, J.H. Blake, H.G. Cole, E.G. Sergeant, and many others, to say nothing of the youngest recruits, W. Winter and R.H.V. Scott. It has, of course, been questioned whether it is desirable for a man of intellect to become purely a professional chessplayer, though no doubt in many cases it means a gain to the chess world and no very great loss otherwise. With regard to "Chess and the Jews" I feel inclined to think that in absolute genius the non-Jewish element holds the palm, from Philidor, Labourdonnais, Morphy, down to Pillsbury and Capablanca. I think a team of "gentiles", as your correspondent calls them, could hold their own against any combination, if selected from Capablanca, Alekhine, Teichmann, Schlechter, Maróczy, Marshall, Atkins, Duras, Vidmar. In point of number I suppose the Jews would prevail. At Petrograd in 1914 there were only four "gentiles" out of eleven, but three of them were amongst the five prize-winners, and the fourth, J. H. Blackburne, was 72 years of age at the time. As your correspondent says, Philosemitism, Antisemitism or Indifferentism have nothing to do with it, but the facts are not quite so convincing as he makes out.'

- 'Some Interesting Facts on Chess from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*' by L. Fainlight, on pages 237-239 of the July 1923 *BCM* presented a condensed account from the earliest times. A brief item on page 371 of the October 1923 *BCM*:

'The well-known chess enthusiast, Peter P. Saburov, writes to point out some errors in Mr Fainlight's article from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. He states that Schiffers, Schlechter and Zukertort were not Jews. Zukertort was the son of a Pastor. Emanuel Schiffers (not B. Schiffers as stated on page 239) was a Russian of German origin; he was born in Petrograd, but his ancestors were from Aachen. Schlechter was a German-Austrian and a catholic.'

(On page 13 of *Carl Schlechter! Life and Times of the Austrian Chess Wizard* (Yorklyn, 1994) Warren Goldman wrote that Schlechter 'was born of a Catholic

family known for its industry and creativity in the field of music’.)

- The above-quoted *BCM* item occasioned a follow-up piece on page 412 of the November 1923 issue:

‘A correspondent writes: “With all deference to M. Saburov (*BCM*, page 371), the great Zukertort was of Jewish race, whatever the religion of his father. The name Zukertort (? Zucker-torte, ‘sugar-tart’) probably derives from the period when the Jews were compelled by the authorities to adopt surnames very often fancy, in place of their original patronymics. Is it not also a fact well known to such as are sufficiently veteran to remember him distinctly that the famous master was clearly a member of the race which has given the world so many illustrious chessplayers? My own recollection of him is perhaps too juvenile to trust.”’

- ‘A Wolf on the Fold’, in the *Australasian Chess Review*, 30 March 1938 (pages 71-72) is quoted below in full:

‘The *Wiener Schachzeitung* has become a weekly instead of a fortnightly, and its great popularity is likely to increase thereby, as there is something very attractive in the idea of getting a chess paper with hot news every week.

It remains to be seen how recent events will affect chess in Austria, but the effect will certainly be adverse. Many, if not most, of the leading masters in Austria, as in many other countries, are of the Jewish race. German chess is now a shadow of what it was.

In no field have the Jews excelled more than in chess. A New Zealand correspondent gives us the following list of famous Jewish masters: Löwenthal, Zukertort, Steinitz, Chigorin, Lasker, Schlechter, Janowsky, Winawer, Tarrasch, Rubinstein, Bernstein, Spielmann.

Among younger masters we have Reshevsky, Fine, Kashdan, Dake, Simonson, Horowitz and many other Americans; Flohr, Botvinnik, Levenfish and so on *ad*

*lib.* Strangely enough, no Jewish player has won or even competed for the world championship since Lasker lost it in 1921 – yet two Jews held the title for the first 55 years. Steinitz was the son of a rabbi and was to have been a rabbi himself; Lasker is also a professing Jew. Reshevsky belongs to the strictest of all Jewish sects.

H.G. Wells, himself a chessplayer, mentions the eminence of the Jewish race in chess, in his *History of the World*. He appears to attribute it entirely to an innate sense of values – a capacity for judging between relative gains and losses with the utmost subtlety.

That is almost certainly a factor, but one could also argue from the fact of racial oppression. The reaction to the oppression has been a tendency among Jews to strive to excel in whatever they take up, whether it be commerce, mathematics, chess or purely artistic spheres in which H.G. Wells' idea would not apply.

Again, in countries where there actually has been oppression of Jews from time to time there would be a tendency for them to seek fields in which they would depend entirely on their own efforts, and not on such things as official preferment.'

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*Afterword:* This article originally appeared as C.N. 3120. See also the [Factfinder](#).

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