

Sultan Khan

Edward Winter

(2003)



- 'An unlettered, illiterate genius.' H. Schonberg, *Grandmasters of Chess* (1973 edition), page 213.
- '[he] was completely illiterate and could therefore not benefit from books on the game.' A. Sunnucks, *The Encyclopaedia of Chess* (1976 edition), page 469.
- 'an illiterate peasant.' E.R. Brace, *An illustrated Dictionary of Chess*, page 275.
- 'completely illiterate.' F. Wilson, *A Picture History of Chess*, page 98.
- '... his complete inability to read any European textbook on the game.' R.N. Coles, *Mir Sultan Khan* (1977 edition), page 7.

In the light of these descriptions, we have been looking back at some earlier comments on Sultan Khan, beginning with page 338 of the September 1929 *BCM* :

'The Nawab Umar Hayat Khan, though occupied with official duties in Whitehall, paid three visits to the Congress [the British Championship at Ramsgate], and showed great interest in the doings of the champion, who, owing to his unfamiliarity with the language and the tournament procedure, was also indebted to his companion interpreter, Syed Akbar Shah. The latter nursed him during his illness, kept him posted with information, and was often to be seen translating press reports to him.'

Next, an account by Harry Golombek on page 175 of the June 1966 *BCM* . (The item was purportedly a review of the first edition of Coles' *Mir Sultan Khan*, but the book was barely mentioned.)

'I first met Sultan Khan when he was competing in his first British Championship at Ramsgate in 1929. Not that we were in the same tournament or anything like it. He was some six years older than me and far in advance of a schoolboy who was competing in his first open tournament (to be precise, the second-class). However, only recently arrived in England he was in search of a type of cooking not too far away from his Indian variety and thus it happened that he and I were the only chessplayers at a Jewish boarding house where, I still remember it, the cooking was indeed infinitely better than anything offered by the smarter hotels of the resort.

Despite the fact that he had little English we got on very well together, particularly over the chess board after the day's play. Though so much younger than him I was more or less able to hold my own in analysis since I was London Boy Champion and had a very quick sight of the board. For this reason, later on, when we did meet in tournaments, he treated me with care and a sort of respect that he did not exactly vouchsafe to players who were by reputation my superior.'

Also in 1966 a more detailed piece by Golombek was published on pages 61-65 of

Chess Treasury of the Air
1966). Two passages are quoted here:

by T. Tiller (Harmondsworth,

'When he first came to Europe, in the early summer of 1929, Sultan Khan could neither read nor write a European language. The few scraps of knowledge he had about the openings had been picked up by watching other Indian players who were able to read English, and his style of play was greatly influenced by the other form of the game.'

'... It so happened however that I stayed at the same boarding house as Sultan Khan, and that we were the only two chessplayers there. Considering the language barrier we understood each other remarkably well, partly by signs and partly by the use of chess pieces and the chess board. For anything complicated I had recourse to his friend and interpreter, whose excellent English more or less compensated for his utter ignorance of chess. Sultan Khan, I discovered, was totally uneducated, rather lazy, and blest, or cursed, with a childish sense of humour that manifested itself in a high-pitched laugh. He loved to play quick games but, strange to relate, match and tournament chess were a trial to him.'

Notwithstanding the various allegations that Sultan Khan was completely illiterate (as opposed to merely unfamiliar with any European languages) we note, without drawing any conclusions, that in the group picture of the masters in the Berne, 1932 tournament book he appeared engrossed in a document:



Berne, 1932. From the back row and from left to right:
W. Rivier, O. Naegeli, P. Johner, B. Colin, H. Grob
F. Gygli, H. Johner, O. Bernstein, A. Staehelin, E. Voellmy
M. Euwe, Sultan Khan, A. Alekhine, W. Henneberger
E. Bogoljubow, S. Flohr

Below is a sketch also from the Berne, 1932 tournament book:



Biographical accounts seldom refer to Sultan Khan's later life, but below are two reports from the 1950s. The first was on page 250 of the August 1954 *BCM* :

'Pakistan. It is good news indeed to hear that the great player Sultan Khan, who made such a mark in European chess during the brief space of four years before the war, is still alive and apparently interested in chess. According to a report a tournament is being held in Pakistan to select four players to meet him in a final tournament. One hopes that this is merely the prelude to the return of so greatly gifted a master to the international arena.'

On what basis the above claim was made is unclear.



Savielly Tartakower and Sultan Khan, match, Semmering, 1931

The second report about Sultan Khan is taken from *CHESS* , 19 December 1959 (page 93) and concerned an apparent mix-up in South Africa with a musician of the same name:

'The *South African Chessplayer* prints an extraordinary report about Sultan Khan, the Indian serf who won the British Championship in three out of four attempts and defeated Tartakower in a match, then vanished back to India and has not been heard of in chess for over a quarter of a century. Kurt Dreyer states that Sultan Khan is living in Durban and is a professional concert singer, "has not played chess for a long time".

Pending confirmation, we take this report *cum grano salis*

Under the heading 'Sultan Khan is *not* in South Africa' the 20 February 1960 *CHESS* a letter from Mohammed Yusuf of Lahore, West Pakistan:

(page 154) published

'The unconfirmed report on Sultan Khan appearing in *CHESS* No. 354 is amusing.

I have known Sultan Khan since 1918. He is settled as a small land-lord in the Sargodha District of the old Punjab. The reason for his disappearance from the chess world is that his patron, the late Malik Sir Umar Hayat Khan Tiwana, died in 1941 [*sic* ; in 1944, in fact]. Since then there has been no great opportunity for players scattered all over the country to meet. Furthermore it is well known that Sultan Khan's knowledge of English does not go beyond his ability just to read a game-score. The secretary of the late Sir Umar used to help him to a certain extent to study annotations. Now he has nobody to help him or to give him practice. Even now he is distinctly better than the best active player in Pakistan or even in India I believe. He is a genius.'



Sultan Khan

It may be mentioned in passing that 'Malik' is sometimes also seen with reference to Sultan Khan himself. For example Schonberg (page 212 of his above-mentioned book) referred to 'Mir Malik Sultan Khan'.

Then there is the following paragraph about Sultan Khan on page 215 of *The Guinness Book of Chess Grandmasters*

by W. Hartston (Enfield, 1996):

'Eighteen years later, however, [i.e. in 1951] when he was shown the moves of the games in the world championship match between Botvinnik and Bronstein, he is reputed to have dismissed them as the games of two very weak players.'

The source of this reputed dismissal is unknown to us, but as noted on page 378 of *Kings, Commoners and Knaves* Sultan Khan has been quoted as making such a remark about Alekhine and Bogoljubow. We quote below from William Winter's memoirs in *CHESS*, February 1963, page 148:

'I remember vividly my first meeting with the dark-skinned man who spoke very little English and answered remarks that he did not understand with a sweet and gentle smile. One of the Alekhine v Bogoljubow matches was in [a] progress and I showed him a short game, without telling him the contestants. "I tink", he said, "that they both very weak players." This was not conceit on his part. The vigorous style of the world championship contenders leading to rapid contact and a quick decision in the middle game was quite foreign to his conception of the Indian game in which the pawn moves only one square at a time.'

On the following page of *CHESS* another incident was related by William Winter:

'At the Team Tournament at Hamburg (1930) he also did extremely well on the top board against the best continental opposition though his apparent lack of any intelligible language annoyed some rivals. "What language does your champion speak?", shouted the Austrian, Kmoch, after his third offer of a draw had been met only with Sultan's gentle smile. "Chess", I replied, and so it proved, for in a few moves the Austrian champion had to resign.'

The problem with this story is that the game between Sultan Khan and Kmoch was drawn.

Readers interested in Sultan Khan will wish to note the publication of the 254-page work, *Kometa Sultan-Khana* by A. Matsukevich (Moscow, 2003).



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Dan Scoones (Victoria, BC, Canada) draws attention to this passage from pages 24-25 of *Lessons from My Games* by Reuben Fine (New York, 1958):

'The story of the Indian Sultan Khan turned out to be a most unusual one. The "Sultan" was not the term of status that we supposed it to be; it was merely a first name. In fact, Sultan Khan was actually a kind of serf on the estate of a maharajah when his chess genius was discovered. He spoke English poorly, and kept score in Hindustani. It was said that he could not even read the European notations.

After the tournament [the 1933 Folkestone Olympiad] the American team was invited to the home of Sultan Khan's master in London. When we were ushered in we were greeted by the maharajah with the remark, "It is an honor for you to be here; ordinarily I converse only with my greyhounds." Although he was a Mohammedan, the maharajah had been granted special permission to drink intoxicating beverages, and he made liberal use of this dispensation. He presented us with a four-page printed biography telling of his life and exploits; so far as we could see his greatest achievement was to have been born a maharajah. In the meantime Sultan Khan, who was our real entrée to his presence, was treated as a servant by the maharajah (which in fact he was according to Indian law), and we found ourselves in the peculiar position of being waited on at table by a chess grand master.'

Finding corroboration of Fine's account may not be easy, but certainly the US team went to London after the Olympiad. We quote below from page 320 of the *Social Chess Quarterly*, October 1933:

'Before their departure from England the victorious American team visited the [Empire Social Chess Club in London], and the youngest member, R. Fine, who is only 18 years old, gave a very successful simultaneous display on 20 boards. Playing almost with lightning rapidity, the young American won 17 games and drew three in a little less than two hours ...'

Below is an extract from the section on Sultan Khan in Fine's book *The World's Great Chess Games* (first published in the early 1950s):

'The appearance of an Indian on the tournament scene was one of the sensations of the early 1930's. Sultan (a first name, not a title) was a serf on the estate of an Indian Maharajah, who was impressed by his extraordinary ability at chess. His master took him to England, where Sultan Khan had to learn the European rules, which were not adhered to in India. In spite of this handicap, his native genius was such that he soon became British champion ...'

See also, in this context, page 51 of *The Chess Beat* and *Chess Life*, February 2002, page 32. by Larry Evans (published in 1982)

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For comments about Sultan Khan by Sir John Simon, together with a photograph of them together, see our feature article [A Chessplaying Statesman](#).

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