

Zugzwang

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Aron Nimzowitsch

‘The most remarkable winning move on record’ was Reuben Fine’s description of 25...h6 in the ‘Immortal Zugzwang Game’ (page 130 of his 1952 book *The World’s Great Chess Games*). On page 32 of *Fifty Great Games of Modern Chess*, Harry Golombek called it the ‘finest possible example of Zugzwang’. Fred Reinfeld considered it Nimzowitsch’s ‘most famous game’ (*Great Moments in Chess*, page 107). As will be seen below, all that may or may not be true, but initially the game was virtually ignored by the chess world.

First, for ease of reference, the moves:

Friedrich Sämisch – Aron Nimzowitsch
Copenhagen, March 1923
Queen's Indian Defence

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 b6 4 g3 Bb7 5 Bg2 Be7 6 Nc3 O-O 7 O-O d5 8 Ne5 c6 9
cxd5 cxd5 10 Bf4 a6 11 Rc1 b5 12 Qb3 Nc6 13 Nxc6 Bxc6 14 h3 Qd7 15 Kh2 Nh5
16 Bd2 f5 17 Qd1 b4 18 Nb1 Bb5 19 Rg1 Bd6 20 e4 fxe4 21 Qxh5 Rxf2 22 Qg5
Raf8 23 Kh1 R8f5 24 Qe3 Bd3 25 Rce1



25...h6 26 White resigns.



Friedrich Sämisch

It is tempting to imagine the game being instantly flashed around the planet as a unique specimen of hypermodern technique resulting in a hapless opponent being tied up, or down, hand-and-foot. In truth, the score is absent from almost all the major chess magazines of 1923 (e.g. *Deutsche Schachzeitung*, *Wiener Schachzeitung*, *BCM*, *American Chess Bulletin* and *Tijdschrift van den Nederlandschen Schaakbond*).

Nor did it appear in the 25-page 'Games of 1923' section in *Chess of To-day* by Alfred Emery (London, 1924) or, even, in Ludwig Bachmann's *Schachjahrbuch 1923* (published in Ansbach the following year), which had nearly 180 games. The year Nimzowitsch died, 1935, Reinfeld brought out a monograph entitled *Thirty-five Nimzowitsch Games, 1904-1927*, but there was still no 'Immortal Zugzwang Game'. Some subsequent 'standard sources' also ignored it, an example being *500 Master Games of Chess* by Tartakower and du Mont (London, 1952).



It was, at least, included in the Copenhagen, 1923 tournament book (page 23), albeit with a mere seven brief notes in Richard Teichmann's characteristically desiccated

style. Black's 15th and 16th moves were allotted one exclamation mark apiece, but Teichmann showed little enthusiasm for the finale. The tournament book also came out as a supplement to the periodical *Kagans Neueste Schachnachrichten*, between the April 1923 and June 1923 issues, and Teichmann's comments were used on page 106 of the July 1923 •*asopis* •*eskoslovenských Šachist*•. It was hardly an auspicious start for the 'most famous game'.

Eventually, Nimzowitsch went on a propaganda blitz. He burst into annotational song on pages 17-18 of the 2/1925 *Wiener Schachzeitung* under the heading 'Zugzwang on a full board!' Double exclamation marks accompanied Black's 10th, 20th and 25th moves, and the high-spirited victor described 25...h6 as follows:

'An exceptionally beautiful problem move! This puts White in nothing less than a tragic *Zugzwang* position (I won't say tragicomic, since the sheer force of Black's play rules out any thought of humour).

... In the opinion of the well-known Danish amateur master, the writer/editor Hemmer Hansen, this game would be worthy of being placed alongside the "Immortal Game". While Anderssen was able to deploy the "sacrifice" as such to maximum benefit, I, Hansen said, achieved a similar effect with the *Zugzwang*. In Danish chess circles, this game is therefore described as the Immortal *Zugzwang* Game!'

Later that year, he continued in the same vein in his first book, *Die Blockade* (page 52), writing of 25...h6:

'A brilliant move which announces the *Zugzwang*. ... This unusually brilliant *Zugzwang* mechanism makes this game, which Dr Lasker in a Dutch publication called a magnificent achievement, a counterpart to the "Immortal Game". There the maximum effect of the "sacrifice", here that of the "*Zugzwang*".'

The Lasker article (in a Dutch newspaper?) has yet to be located.

Die Blockade was followed, also in 1925, by the first edition of *Mein System*, in which (page 55) Nimzowitsch had fresh words of acclaim for his performance:

'... a short game, which is known far and wide as the "Immortal *Zugzwang* Game". It is of interest to us because the outpost is used here merely as a threat or even just as a ghost. And yet its effect is enormous.'

It had been a quick transition from commendations in Danish and Dutch sources to recognition ‘far and wide’. Meeker sentiments by Nimzowitsch appeared in the English edition, *My System*, published in 1929, although that version did have his closing remark, ‘a brilliant move which announces the *Zugzwang*’.

The English translator of *My System* was Philip Hereford (i.e. Arthur Hereford Wykeham George, who died in 1937). His introduction, dated 29 August 1929, referred to *Zugzwang* as the only word left untranslated in the book, ‘partly since it is [*sic*] become familiar in English chess circles, partly, in fact mainly, because the single word conveys an idea, or complex of ideas, which can only be expressed in English by a circumlocution’.

In reality, the term *Zugzwang* was not commonly found in English-language chess literature prior to the publication of *My System*. In German, though, it had been in regular use in the nineteenth century. Pages 353-358 of the September 1858 *Deutsche Schachzeitung* had an unsigned article ‘*Zugzwang, Zugwahl und Privilegien*’. F. Amelung employed the terms *Zugzwang*, *Tempozwang* and *Tempozugzwang* on pages 257-259 of the September 1896 issue of the same magazine. When a perceived example of *Zugzwang* occurred in the third game of the 1896-97 world championship match between Steinitz and Lasker, after 34...Rg8, the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* (December 1896, page 368) reported that ‘White has died of *Zugzwang*’. As is shown, *inter alia*, by the appearance of that game in the Fine/Reinfeld collection of Lasker’s masterpieces, published in 1935, *Zugzwang* established itself in English-language chess sources in the 1930s.

Then came the quest for a satisfactory translation or circumlocution. The most frequent rendering nowadays is compulsion to move, but many fanciful proposals had to be endured first. Discussing the position reached after 40...Qe2 in Bogoljubow v Alekhine, Hastings, 1922, Brian Harley offered *straight-waistcoat* on page 27 of his 1936 book *Chess and its Stars*. That, in turn, was converted into US parlance as *straightjacket* by the *American Chess Bulletin* (July-August 1936 issue, page 120). On page 266 of the 14 March 1939 *CHESS*, H.G. Hart suggested *move-bound*. The same magazine (20 August 1939, page 438) recorded R.E. Kemp’s offering of squeezed, ‘in use in his club 45 years ago, long before Bridge-players took up the term for the exact parallel of this operation in their game’.

After the Second World War, Assiac (the pseudonym of Heinrich Fraenkel) organized a *New Statesman* competition to find a suitable translation of *Zugzwang*. As reported on page 54 of his book *The Pleasures of Chess*, the entries included *plank-walk*, *movicide*, *goose-gang*, *gadarene-pull* and *dreadmill*. Both *squeeze* and *movebound* were submitted, and the latter actually won first prize for Gerald Abrahams. H.G. Hart’s *CHESS* precedent had evidently been forgotten. Walter Korn

went further in his book *The Brilliant Touch in Chess* (page 72), offering *movebound*, *movestruck*, *movetight*, *off tempo*, *in a jam*, *in a squeeze* and *duress*. At least part of the intention of all this was to elude a purportedly ugly-sounding German word.

Equivalents were sought in other languages too. In an article on page 173 of the September 1942 issue of the Argentinian magazine *Caissa*, Carlos Skalicka proposed *semi-ahogado* (Spanish for *semi-stalemate*). The same item maintained, on undisclosed grounds, that the term *Zugzwang* had been invented over 50 years previously by Hermann Zwanzig (1837-1894), and that Dufresne's opinion was that it had 'truly enriched the German language'.

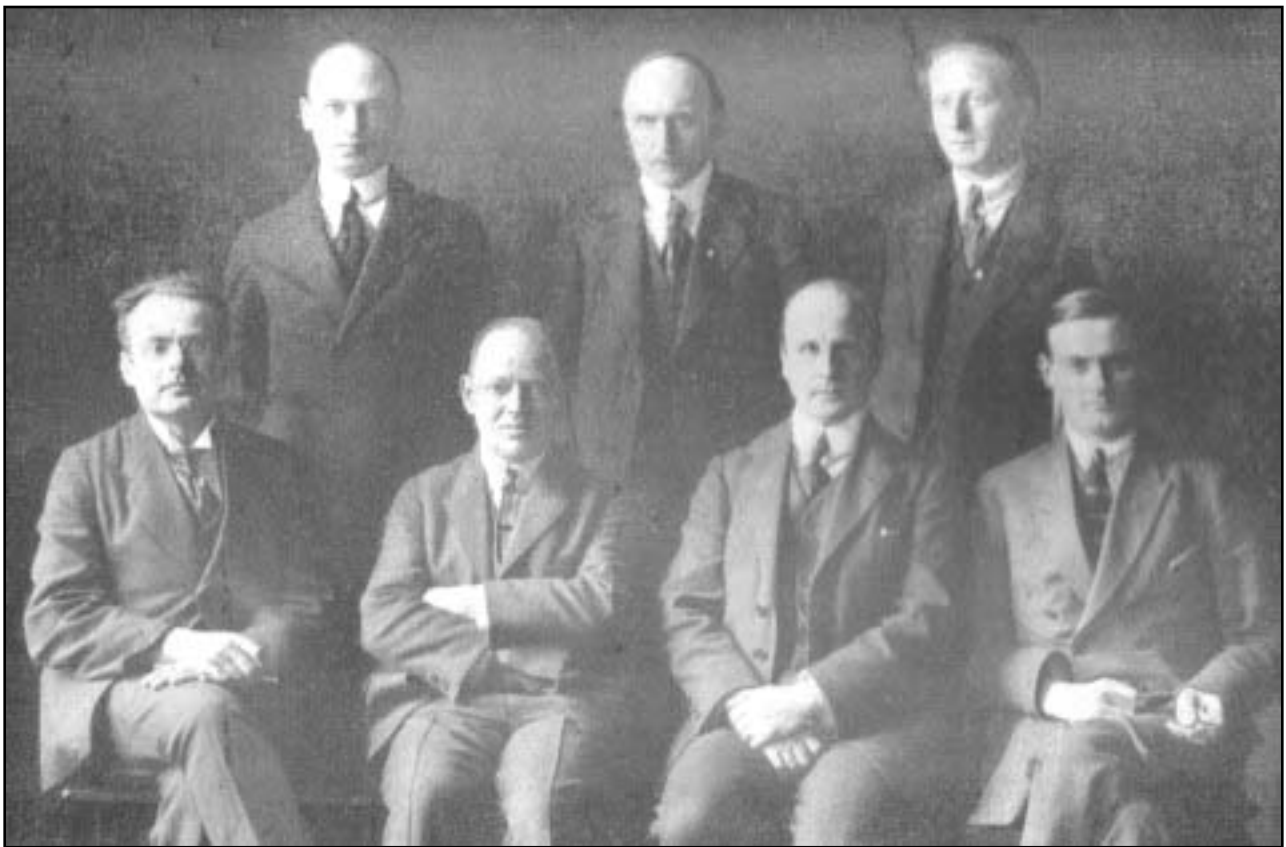
A word is normally defined, or at least clearly understood, before it is translated, but with *Zugzwang* the contrary occurred. In an heretical article 'That *Zugzwang* Nonsense!' on pages 26-27 of the January 1972 *BCM* Wolfgang Heidenfeld (1911-1980) threw a weighty spanner in the works:

'The opponent's *Zugzwang* – the compulsion (as opposed to the right) to make a move – enables a player to win – or draw, as the case may be – a position which he could not otherwise win or draw. If the opponent had the choice of moving or "passing" at his discretion, there would be no win or draw. Once this criterion is lacking there is no *Zugzwang*. There may be a complete blockade, with one side powerless to make any useful move – but this is no real *Zugzwang*.'

On this basis Heidenfeld denied that the Sämisch v Nimzowitsch game featured *Zugzwang* at all. Observing that in the final position it would be more advantageous for White to move (e.g. 26 Bc1 Bxb1 27 Rgf1) than to pass, he suggested that the 'Immortal *Zugzwang* Game nonsense' had resulted from 'the vanity of Nimzowitsch'. He also disallowed Alekhine v Nimzowitsch, San Remo, 1930 as an example of *Zugzwang*, notwithstanding Alekhine's claim in his second *Best Games* collection. Similar arguments were outlined by Andy Soltis on page 55 of *Chess to Enjoy* (New York, 1978), and the current hesitancy over the exact meaning of *Zugzwang* is highlighted by the contrasting entries for the word in the 1984 and 1992 editions of *The Oxford Companion to Chess*.

The debate is far from over, but in the meantime some further oddities about the Sämisch v Nimzowitsch game may be recorded here. Although it apparently won no brilliancy prize, Ludwig Steinkohl put it in his 1995 book *99 Schönheitspreise aus 150 Schachjahren*, calling the opening the Catalan, rather than the Queen's Indian Defence. Al Horowitz's book *All About Chess* gave it twice, with two different introductions. In presenting the closing position, *Chess Techniques* by A.R.B.

Thomas reversed the colours, stating that Nimzowitsch, as White, won with the concluding move h3. (It is true, however, that in an earlier round the two masters had played the same opening against each other, with opposite colours and a minor transposition, up to White's eighth move.) *Aaron Nimzowitsch Ein Leben für das Schach* by Gero H. Marten (page 147) asserted that Sämisch thought for an hour before resigning, whereas on page 443 of *Die Hypermoderne Schachpartie* Tartakower, a participant in the Copenhagen, 1923 tournament, wrote that Sämisch overstepped the time-limit. Although Tartakower concluded that page with the words 'The Immortal *Zugzwang* Game', they were indented and in quotation marks, not necessarily suggesting that Tartakower himself had originated the epitaph as is sometimes believed.



Copenhagen, 1923. Seated from left to right: A. Nimzowitsch, R. Spielmann, E. Jacobsen, F. Sämisch
 Standing: S. Tartakower, O. Rützou, J. Møller.

Just as sacrifices are attractive because possession of material is usually an advantage, the appeal of *Zugzwang* is that possession of the move is almost invariably desirable. Difficult to define and translate, *Zugzwang* is, in all its possible forms, easy to enjoy. As the prize-winning Gerald Abrahams suggested on page 38 of *Brilliance in Chess* (London, 1977), 'of all chess situations, *Zugzwang* is the one most likely to stimulate mirth'.

Afterword (C.N. 2929, in May 2003):

Per Skjoldager (Fredericia, Denmark) writes to us as follows:

‘You list many major chess periodicals from which the “Immortal Zugzwang Game” was absent. I think it is even more remarkable that it was also absent from the Scandinavian chess magazines Skakbladet, Norsk Schakblad and Tidskrift för Schack.

You mention Hemmer Hansen, and I can confirm that he did indeed write something similar to the words attributed to him by Nimzowitsch. In an article on the Copenhagen tournament in Jyllands-posten, 12 April 1923 he gave the following account of Nimzowitsch’s win in the game in question:

“His game in Copenhagen against Sämisch is actually of the same rank as Anderssen’s famous Immortal Game. The difference, however, is that while Anderssen was trying to mate his opponent with his combinations, Nimzowitsch tries to paralyse his opponent’s forces. In the game mentioned he sacrifices a piece and with his own five pieces he puts six enemy pieces into such deep disarray that Sämisch resigned the game long before mate was in sight.”

Yet we still lack proof that “Danish chess circles” recognized the game as the “Immortal Zugzwang Game”.

I can also report that Emanuel Lasker annotated the game in De Telegraaf, 2 June 1923. The item was found by Piet Zwetsloot and Wim Nijenhuis. After 25...h6 Lasker wrote:

“In this remarkable position all White’s pieces are stalemated. For example: 26 g4 R5f3! or 26 Kh2 R5f3! So White can only make a few pawn moves. Therefore White resigned here.”

It will be noted that Lasker referred only to a “remarkable position”, whereas Nimzowitsch quoted him as calling the game a “magnificent

achievement”. But, of course, this article may not be the only place where Lasker wrote about the game.

The exact date of the game can be mentioned here, i.e. 10 March 1923 according to Jyllands-posten of the following day.

You discussed the varying accounts of how the game ended. This is what appeared in an article in the newspaper Politiken on 11 March 1923:

“Sämisch ponders for so long that he falls into time-trouble. However, his efforts cannot save him from the fateful dilemma and since the loss of the queen is inevitable in only two more moves [*sic*], he resigns the game, which has lasted for 26 moves in total.”

We would add that one of the very few chess magazines to publish the score in 1923 was *The Chess Amateur*. Some eight months after the game had been played the November 1923 issue (page 37) gave the ‘score and notes from an excellent column which seems to be edited by the Hastings Chess Association’. The latter publication was quoted as saying that the game contained ‘a most subtle sacrifice leading to a curious finish’, and the move 25...h6 was given two exclamation marks with the following note: ‘White must either give up the queen (...Rf3 is threatened) or else give up a piece to allow the queen to retreat!’

To the Chess Notes [main page](#).

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