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Jeremy P. Spinrad



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Julius Mendheim

In some previous articles I've discussed some "forgotten" masters who perhaps are not all that forgotten (e.g. von der Lasa). By contrast, this article discusses perhaps the most obscure player of master rank we have considered so far. Julius Mendheim has no entry in the *Oxford Companion to Chess*, no games in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games*, and his very short entry in Gaige's *Chess Personalia* is none too sure about his dates of birth and death. I am fairly well read on 19th-century chess, but the name did not ring any bells when I came upon in an interesting article from the *Chess Player's Chronicle* of 1856.

Throughout the Staunton years, the *Chronicle* had a marked streak of English nationalism, sometimes used as a mask for praise of Staunton himself. By 1856 there was a new editor, and he brought a much more balanced perspective, as we see here from the aforementioned article on page 125:

"The games of McDonnell and De La Bourdonnais excited more than a passing interest in the Chess circles of England. Indeed, for a time they so affected our national prejudice that we began to consider all Chess bound up with the play of England and France. We recounted the names of Legalle, Philidor and Des Chapelles with becoming reverence; we bowed to the authority of Sarratt and Lewis; but not to speak of Russia, Italy, and Austria, in a marvelous manner we overlooked the rising genius of the great Prussian schools of Chess, and the transcendent ability of the illustrious Mendheim. As for Popert, we reckoned him an Englishman. A victory over French players was therefore the one thing desired; if THEY were overcome, we imagined ourselves masters of the Chess world ..."

Anyone who has read a reasonable amount of early and mid-19th-century chess history knows almost all of the names mentioned, but who the heck is this "illustrious Mendheim"? "Transcendent ability" is pretty fair praise for someone most of us have never heard of!

An article in *The Philidorian* of February, 1838, pp. 118-121 mentions Mendheim very briefly in passing, as one of the strongest Berlin players. The 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on chess mentions Mendheim as the only good German player of the early 1800s. There is somewhat more about Mendheim in Schlechter's edition of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*.

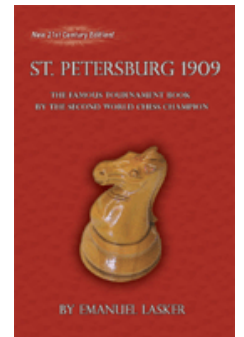
Mendheim, who was born around 1788 and died about 1836, was apparently financially successful, allowing him to pursue his love for chess more freely than many others of the period. He gets some mention in the *Handbuch's* section on problem composers. Mendheim wrote several problem books; some of his problems were viewed as particularly brilliant for their time period.

We then come to Mendheim's position as one of the founding fathers of German chess. Perhaps I am imagining this, since German is not my native language, but there seems to be an attempt in the *Handbuch* to downplay Mendheim's role in the development of German chess.

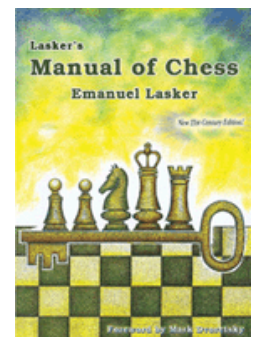
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Ludwig Bledow

The article (which is not by von der Lasa; I would be curious as to whether some earlier editions of the *Handbuch* covered German chess of this time period) mentions that Mendheim is one of the possible forefathers of German chess, and that his strength can be seen from the fact that he single-handedly conducted the correspondence games that his club won over other cities. Correspondence chess between cities was considered very important in these days when travel was so much more difficult; for example, Szen became known as a great master thanks to the victory of Pest over Paris. The *Handbuch* then discusses the relationship between Mendheim and Bledow, the player generally acknowledged as the founder of German chess. The writer, Otto Koch, takes pains to say that Mendheim could not be considered a major influence on Bledow, since Mendheim is basically a follower of Philidor, while Bledow has a unique style that can only be attributed to himself, and that Bledow's influence on German chess development was quite different from Mendheim's. However, it seems to me the article grudgingly admits that the young Bledow lost the majority of the games he played with the older player Mendheim.

An article *Juden in Schachleben Deutschlands 1830-1930* (Jews in German Chess Life) by Egbert Meissenburg in *Menora: Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte* 1996 fills in some extra details, drawing on a longer article Meissenburg wrote for *Rochade-Europa* in August 1996 article. Mendheim was a member of the Berlin Schachgesellschaft, but while he was a regular guest at the so-called "Grosse Club" of Berlin, he was never a regular member there, despite having the reputation of being the best Berlin player.

Why might there be an attempt to minimize the influence of Mendheim? And why would he not be a member of the more exclusive chess club? Perhaps he was simply a difficult character; why was he conducting the club's correspondence games by himself, for example? However, another possibility gets into one of the deepest historical issues I can imagine: the place of Jews in Germany. Among different groups and at different times in history, Jews were both completely accepted as Germans, and (more famously) treated more inhumanely than most of us can imagine. Mendheim, as you might have guessed by now, was Jewish. The best chess players of Berlin may not have discriminated against Jews; for example Bledow, definitely a member of the intellectual elite, worked closely with Horwitz, who was Jewish and a student of Mendheim's. But I certainly think it is possible that later Germans might feel more comfortable with Bledow as the founder of modern German chess rather than Mendheim. I have no proof of this, which all comes from my reading of a foreign language, and I would love to hear other opinions.

I would certainly like to know more about Mendheim, and how the British writer came to esteem him so highly. According to Meissenburg, Mieses calls Mendheim both the strongest Jewish player in the world of his time, and the strongest player at that time in Germany. What do all these people know about Mendheim that we have forgotten?

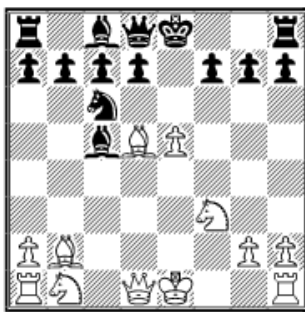
Unfortunately, we will never know how Mendheim would fare in a match with La Bourdonnais, since he never made the pilgrimage to the Café de la Régence which would have made him better known in chess history. Nevertheless, there may be a lot more which could be dug up regarding a

player who may have been among the very best in the world in the 1820s and early 1830s, and I hope someone can help fill in gaps. Certainly some of his correspondence games survive and are in Bledow's books. These include at least two against Breslau in 1829-1833, two against Hamburg 1833-1836 which he seems to have played pretty much on his own, and two games against Magdeburg 1833-1834 in which he was part of the playing committee. Is this how the author knew of Mendheim's style, or is there a larger stash of Mendheim's games somewhere?

The only source of Mendheim games I have access to is the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, 1843 edition. One game is given specifically as Mendheim's, on page 127. Strangely enough, this game was both a win and a loss for Mendheim. Originally, the game was played by correspondence between Mendheim and the Breslau chess club. The Breslau club lost after playing 21...g4 instead of the move shown below, and lost quickly after making some other poor moves. A player named Angerstein proposed replaying the game from the same position with the improved move 21...h5, and won this "back game" against Mendheim as shown below.

**Mendheim - Breslau/Angerstein** (notes from *Handbuch des Schachspiels* 1843 p. 127):

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.c3 Nf6 5.d4 exd4 6.e5 Ne4 7.Bd5 Nxf2 8.Kxf2 dxc3+ 9.Ke1 cxb2 10.Bxb2**



According to Lolli the game is equal, in that the three pawns are worth as much as the knight. Lolli has black play 10... Ne7 and gives three continuations, of which the last is 11.Bb3 d5. We are not sure of this line, because we would play 12.exd6, and Black's pawns lose their strength, since he is no longer three pawns stronger on the queen side, instead just 3 against 1 and on the king side 3 against 2, while the opponent has

a strong piece. Since 10...0-0 would have been dangerous because of the white bishop, the best move on the board is: **10...Qe7 11.Bxc6** So that the knight cannot move to d8 and e6. **11.Bxc6 dxc6 12.Qc2 Be6 13.Nbd2 0-0-0 14.Ke2 g6** To free the rook on h8, without leaving the pawn on h7 *en prise*; the move 14.Bd5 might have been even better. **15.Ne4 Bb6 16.Qa4 Bd5 17.Rhc1** Moving the rook on a1 here would have been better. **17...f5 18.Ned2** Perhaps 18.Nf6 would have been better, even though Mendheim says it would have been a mistake, as it would have forced him to take the bishop on d5, undoubling black's pawns. To us this seems like a lesser evil than leaving this dangerous bishop in the middle of the board. **18...Bxf3+** This move of Breslau is not well considered, since White can take back with the other knight. Mendheim says that 18...g5 would have put White into a difficult position. **19.Nxf3 g5 20.Rf1 Rd5 21.Rad1**

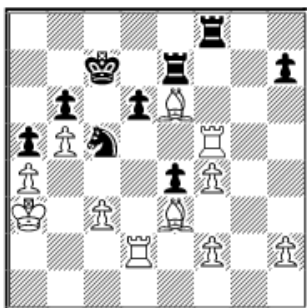


Breslau moved **21...g4** here, made a few weak moves, and eventually lost. Later this game was taken up by correspondence between Mendheim and Angerstein, and continued as follows: **21...h5 22.Nd2 Qe6 23.Nc4 Bc5 24.Qc2 f4 25.Qe4 Rhd8 26.a4 b5 27.axb5 Qg4+ 28.Qf3 Qxf3+ 29.gxf3 Rxd1 30.Rxd1 Rxd1 31.Kxd1 cxb5 32.Nd2 Kd7 33.Ke2 Ke6 34.Kd3 a5 35.h3 a4 36.Ke4 Bb4 37.Nb1 c6 38.Na3 Bd2 39.**

**Nb1 Be1 40.Na3 Bf2 41.Ba1 b4 42.Nc4 a3 43.Nd2 c5 44.Nc4 Bd4 45.Bxd4 cxd4 46.Na5 a2 47.Nb3 d3 48.Kxd3 Kxe5 0-1**

I believe that the following two games, taken from page 78 of the *Handbuch*, were also played at least in part by Mendheim, and show very good judgment on his part. In the first game, Berlin's opening edge never quite goes away. The key error seems to me the very natural move 24...e4, after which Berlin exploits its advantage aggressively.

**Berlin-Magdeburg**, (notes from *Handbuch des Schachspiels* 1843 p. 78):  
**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Bxf3 5.gxf3 dxe5 6.Qxd8+ Kxd8 7. Be3 Bd6 8.Nd2 Nf6 9.Nc4 Nc6 10.Nxd6 cxd6 11.Rg1 Nh5 12.0-0 Kc7 13.Bc4 f6 14.c3 a5 15.Rd5 b6 16.a4 g6 17.Kc2 Rab8 18.Kb3 Nf4 19. Rd2 Rhe8 20.Ka3 Ne6 21.b4 f5 22.b5 Ncd8 23.exf5 gxf5 24.f4 e4 25. Rg3 Re7 26.Rh3 Nc5 27.Rh5 Nde6 28.Rxf5 Rf8 29.Bxe6**



Black resigns, because of the continuation 29...Nxe6 30.Bxb6+ Kxb6 31.Rd6+ Kc7 32.Rxe6 Rxe6 33.Rxf8.

The next game had me somewhat mystified. In general, it is a well played game, certainly too high quality to have both players miss the simple win of a piece by 43...Rf2+. I believe that the *Handbuch* has a typo, and that Breslau's actual move is 43.Ne4 rather than Nf7.

The move 43.Ne4 is given in a web article written by Harald Fietz about the old Berlin chess clubs. Thus, the Breslau club loses because they are forced into passively shuttling their king back and forth, rather than because of a coarse blunder.

**Breslau-Berlin** (notes taken from *Handbuch des Schachspiels* 1843, p. 78): **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Qe7**

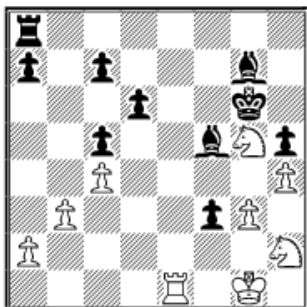


This opening play by Black certainly cannot be recommended, but does not in itself lead to a lost game.

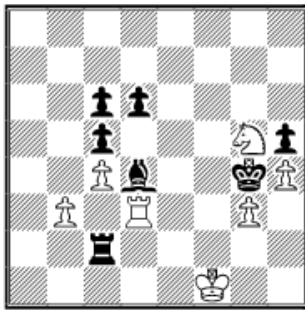
**4.Bc4 exd4 5.Qxd4 Nc6 6.Qd3 f5 7. Bd5 fxe4 8.Qxe4 Nf6 9.Bxc6+ bxc6 10. Qxe7+ Bxe7**



**11.0-0 h6 12.b3 Kf7 13.Bb2 Re8 14.c4 c5 15.Nbd2 g5 16.g3 Bf5 17.Rfe1 Bf8 18.h4 g4 19.Nh2 Rxe1+ 20.Rxe1 h5 21. f4 gxf3 22.Bxf6 Kxf6 23.Ne4+ Kg6 24. Ng5 Bg7**



**25.Nhxf3 a5 26.Ne6 Bxe6 27.Rxe6+ Bf6 28.Kf1 a4 29.Nd2 axb3 30.axb3 Kf5 31.Re3 Be5 32.Rd3 Ra2 33.Ke1 Kg4 34.Ne4 Kh3 35.Kf1 Rb2 36.Rf3 Kg4 37.Rd3 Bd4 38.Ke1 Kf5 39.Ng5 c6 40.Kf1 Rf2+ 41.Ke1 Rc2 42.Kf1 Kg4**



### 43.Ne4

Here the *Handbuch* gives 43.Nf7??, which would lose to 43...Rf2+, but I believe 43.Ne4 must have been the move.

43...d5 44.cxd5 cxd5 0-1

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