

Yeralash or the discovery of a missing link

For more than a century, bridge and card game historians have been searching for the origin of both the game and the name of Bridge. So far, the oldest document containing some information on the topic, is the famous *Biritch or Russian Whist* pamphlet, published by John Collinson in 1886, of which only a few copies have been preserved.

Both elements of its title, the name Biritch and the description of the game as Russian Whist, lead to the assumption that the cradle of the game could be situated on Slav soil, but the lack of hard evidence left ample room during the 20th century for other speculations, placing the origins of the game in Constantinople, the Levant, Egypt (Alexandria, Cairo) or India.

In June 2011, Hans Secelle (Schelderode, Belgium), having done extensive research on the history of Bridge, has put an end to all these speculations. Going through the Bridge Collection Amsterdam, which is part of the Special Collections of the Amsterdam University Library, he discovered the title of a booklet, the content of which is definitely pointing out Russia as country of origin, and at the same time confirming a recent presumption that the origins of the game must be found in that country before the middle of the 19th century.

In 1869, Christian Vanderheid, the Austrian author of an number of publications on card games, published his *Gründlicher Selbstunterricht zur Erlernung des Jarolasch oder das russische Whist* [Extensive Self-teaching for the Learning of Yeralash or Russian Whist], published in Vienna by Wenedikt.

His thirty-two-page booklet contains the rules of a game called Yeralash (Jarolasch) which, apart from the playing with a dummy, is almost identical to Biritch, as described by Collinson in 1886. The Yeralash game possesses already the following characteristic features: a rudimentary form of bidding, the possibility to play at no-trumps, a suit hierarchy, slam bonuses, (re)doubling and scoring under and above the line. Even playing with a dummy is touched upon, but just like in Dummy Whist, only as a variation if only three players are available. The oldest source mentioning the existence of a card game for four players where the hand is always played with a dummy, is – remarkably enough– also of German origin: *Illustriertes allgemeines Familien-Spielbuch* [Illustrated general Family Games-Manual] by Jan Daniel Georgens (Leipzig and Berlin 1882), published four years before Collinson's pamphlet !

At the beginning of the previous century, recognized authorities like Robert Frederic Foster and William Dalton drew attention to a possible affinity between 'Yeralash' (Russ. Ералаш; possible transliterations: Jarolasch, Jarolasj, Geralasch) and Bridge, but they never mentioned a source to substantiate their assumption, a source they probably didn't even knew about. More often later authorities like Oswald Crawford, Milton Work, Emanuel Lasker or George Hervey, pointed to the younger Russian game of Vint (or Wint) as possible ancestor. A century later the French and Dutch bridge researchers Thierry Depaulis and Jac Fuchs mentioned a manual, printed in 1848 in Moscow, which contains a description of whist-preference ('vist-preferans'). They claimed that this game was renamed Yerolash and that it seemed to be the direct forerunner of Biritch. But they too didn't show any piece of evidence or any description of sources, which were probably unknown to them.

As a matter of fact, Secelle's discovery has confirmed the correctness of Foster's, Dalton's, Depaulis's and Fuchs's initial, albeit rather vague or unsubstantiated assumptions : both the rules of Yeralash and the fact that, like Biritch, the second name

of Yeralash is 'Russian Whist', indicate undeniably that the origin of most elements which are now typical for the game of Bridge, must indeed be situated in Russia.

What is more, Secelle's discovery furnishes the conclusive evidence that the archetype of bridge existed already in 1869, also 17 years earlier than the year 1886 in which John Collinson published his pamphlet ! But as Vanderheid, in 1869, is testifying of the game's popularity in the German speaking parts of Europe, it must there have been introduced long before, and therefore the game of Yeralash must have been played in Russia still many years earlier. So, after Secelle's discovery the probable development of the game that is to be considered as the ancestor of the present Contract Bridge, must be traced back to the period *before* the middle of the 19th century. So Yeralash can be considered as the missing link between Biritch and the game (whist-preference ?) which came before Yeralash. As a consequence it will be the task of bridge historians to find convincing sources and other evidence of the existence of Yeralash and related games like whist-preference, including the names of the games and their rules, in Russian sources of the first half of the 19th century.

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