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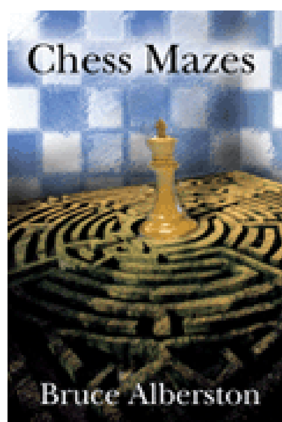

Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, **ChessCafe.com** has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the **Archives**. The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online at least once each week, usually on Thursday or Friday. We will update the **ChessCafe** home page whenever there has been a "new" item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

The following is an excerpt from an unpublished manuscript by Hans Kmoch (1894-1973). Kmoch's career as a player, journalist, and arbiter brought him into contact with some of the greatest players of all time. We extend our thanks to Burt Hochberg, who owns the manuscript, for allowing us to publish this excerpt, which he has edited especially for the **ChessCafe**.

Grandmasters I Have Known

by Hans Kmoch

Aaron Nimzovich (1886-1935)

"He pretends to be crazy in order to drive us all crazy." This was Tartakower's dictum on his colleague Nimzovich.

The man was not exactly crazy, but he did have certain marked peculiarities, which I had ample opportunity to observe during the nine years I knew him.

We first met at Baden-Baden in 1925 and quickly became good friends when I innocently told him how much I had enjoyed the game he had won against Rosselli. Nimzovich suffered from the delusion that he was unappreciated and that the reason was malice.

All it took to make him blossom, as I later learned, was a little praise. His paranoia was most evident when he dined in company. He always thought he was served much smaller portions than everyone else. He didn't care about the actual amount but only about the imagined affront. I once suggested that he and I order what the other actually wanted and, when the food was served, exchange plates. After we had done so, he shook his head in disbelief, still thinking that he had received the smaller portion.

He was born in Riga, the capital of Latvia, which in czarist times had a strong German culture as well as a good reputation in chess. The chess column of the *Riga Tagblatt* was well-known in Europe, and the Riga Variation of the Ruy Lopez (1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 0-0 Nxe4 6 d4 exd4) had considerable significance for a long time until Capablanca demolished it in 1915. In the atmosphere of his hometown, Nimzovich learned to speak German with the skill of an actor and to play chess like a master.

The Russian word nyem-tso-vitch, with the stress on the first syllable, can be translated as "son of a German." In the Latin alphabet the name has appeared in a variety of spellings, none of them specifically sanctioned by its owner, as far as I know. The most common form in English is Nimzovich, though it misrepresents the correct pronunciation of the first vowel.

When civil war broke out in Russia around 1917, Nimzovich was trapped in the Baltic war zone between the rightists and leftists. He escaped forced service in one of the armies by complaining so insistently about a fly on his head that they finally left the "madman" alone. The "madman" sneaked out and made his way to Berlin, where he presented himself as Arnold Nimzovich. He used the name Arnold possibly as a precaution against anti-Semitism, though he soon reverted to his real first name. After some years of wandering, he finally settled in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Nimzovich was a great player but, like Bogolyubov, only came close to the top, never quite reaching world championship class. His most brilliant success – a little late, considering he was then 43 – was winning the Karlsbad tournament in 1929. Like Steinitz and Tarrasch, Nimzovich was also a prominent teacher of strategy, though he and Tarrasch disagreed on many points.

Nimzovich was a moderate eater, drank very little if any beer or wine, and disliked smoking so strongly that he often got into arguments with smokers, especially when they were his opponents. But he had a keen sense of humor and enjoyed a good laugh, even at his own expense. This once helped me save a potentially embarrassing situation at the Bled tournament of 1931. Yugoslavia was then a kingdom, and Bled was the summer residence of the royal family. The queen and her children were in fact living there while the tournament was in progress, and the tournament committee was nervously on the alert in case Her Majesty might drop in. Considering the circumstances, the committee was mortified when Nimzovich, who that day had a bye, sauntered into the playing room wearing only a bathrobe, and refused to leave. Imagine a Jewish chess player presenting himself almost naked to the queen! A horrible case of *lèse*

majesté.

I happened to be the tournament director, and the committee came to me desperately seeking help. I grabbed Nimzovich gently by the neck and gave him a boot in the behind as I propelled him toward the door. Fortunately, he saw the humor in the situation and left at once, laughing all the way.

Among grandmasters, Nimzovich's best friend – and his greatest admirer – was Dr. Milan Vidmar. Over the board, however, these two were fierce enemies, always producing games full of fireworks. I played four tournament games with Nimzovich, losing three and drawing one. He was too strong for me, as he was for so many others. In speed chess, though, one of our encounters did not turn out so happily for him. At a rapid-chess tournament in Breslau in 1925, part of the first prize was enough silk to make six shirts. Nimzovich, taking it for granted that he would win, found out everything he could about the silk even before the tournament began. As it happened, however, I defeated him in the first round – in a French Defense, in fact, in which he had played his specialty 3 e5. I went on to win the tournament and the silk.

On another occasion, in Berlin, having missed the first prize by losing to Sämisch, Nimzovich got up on a table and shouted, "Why must I lose to this idiot?" This story was told to me by the idiot himself.

Nimzovich also lost his temper at the end of the Marienbad tournament in 1925, which he would have won had he defeated Spielmann in the last round. But that game ended in a draw, and Nimzovich had to share first and second prizes with Rubinstein. He was so disappointed that he openly accused Spielmann of dishonor.

My last meeting with Nimzovich was also the longest. It took place in 1934, when we were both following the second Alekhine-Bogolyubov world championship match as reporters. The games of the match were scheduled to be played in many parts of Nazi Germany – unfriendly territory for a Jew and not particularly safe for a Gentile either, in view of the tensions immediately preceding Hitler's bloody purge of his political enemies, among them Ernst Roehm.

Nimzovich considered himself protected by three consulates: the Latvian because of his birthplace, the Danish because of his residence, and the Dutch because some of his reports were going to a newspaper in Holland. He boasted of this protection even to Reichsminister Hans Frank, who at that time was in charge of the "protection" of art and later became the governor of Nazi-occupied Poland. Frank followed a few games of the match and sometimes chatted with the masters and reporters, including Nimzovich. He even invited the whole chess troupe to his villa for lunch. The Jews Mieses and Nimzovich were included in the invitation, but only Nimzovich showed up. At the luncheon he demonstrated his usual persecution mania by complaining first about a dirty plate and then about a dirty knife. The Reichsminister, seated directly opposite him, pretended not to hear.

In Kissingen, where some of the match games were played, I was a guest in the same hotel at which I had stayed during the tournament in 1928. Overcrowded then, it was empty in 1934. At dinnertime, when the restaurant should have been crowded, there were only four people in the room: my wife and I, and, at another table, Frank and an elderly man who I later learned was the composer Richard Strauss. The sinister emptiness of that dining room, which the hotel manager attributed to "bad economic conditions," should have been a forewarning, but the Nazi leaders understood nothing. Frank himself failed to understand what was going on under his governorship in Poland. He became known as "the butcher of Poland," and for his war crimes he was hanged in Nuremberg.

Nimzovich caused several incidents during that 1934 match, all of them harmless except one. And for a moment, that one was hair-raisingly serious. One day when a high officer in a Nazi uniform entered the press room, Nimzovich brusquely demanded to see his credentials. When the perplexed officer didn't answer at once, Nimzovich asked him to leave. The other reporters, including myself, were horrified, expecting the Nazi to react violently after receiving such an order from a Jew. But, amazingly, nothing happened. The officer simply left.

Nimzovich appeared to be in good health at the time of the 1934 match. Later that same year, however, after agreeing to play a match with Euwe, he canceled the match for reasons of ill health. On March 16, 1935, he died of cancer. [Some sources say the cause of death was pneumonia. – BH] Alekhine, who a few years later would write his infamous anti-Semitic articles for a Nazi newspaper in Holland, told me that Nimzovich's cancer was, in his exact words, "syphilitic in origin."

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