

# **The Identity of Jewish Chess Players: An Analysis of Jewish Chess History Writings of the 19th and the Early 20th Century**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study of the history of Jewish chess players is a brand new field of history study. This paper deals with how Jewish chess players in the 19th and early 20th century considered chess and the identity of the Jewish ethnic group. This study will analyze writings related to Jewish chess players, which are mostly from this period, and demonstrate how Jewish players utilized chess to create a sense of collectiveness and combat anti-Semitism. The significance of this study lies in that it explores the history of Jewish chess players, which is a brand new and promising field in history, and is useful for the further study of Jewish ideology and the appearance of nationalism in the 19th and 20th century.

**Keywords:** *chess, Jewish people, nationalism, Zionism, anti-Semitism*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is an intriguing phenomenon that throughout history, large proportions of prominent chess players are of Jewish descent. However, Jewish chess players had indeed experienced a difficult time – the 19th and the early 20th century, marked by increasing sentiment of anti-Semitism – that is, hatred towards the Jews in Europe – and the persecution of the Jews in Nazis land starting from the 1930s. In response, a number of Jewish people demonstrated intelligence and the capability of Semitic ethnic groups through their experience with chess. This study aims to explore how chess was perceived by the Jewish people and how their identity shaped their experience in chess in the 19th and the early 20th century.

This study argues that chess is perceived as a proper entertainment in general in Jewish culture, and became a tool for the demonstration of Jewish superiority in intelligence and the promotion of Zionism in the 19th and early 20th century, though the attitudes towards chess and Zionism varied slightly among chess historians and players of different eras. This study will mainly focus on Jewish chess historical writings in the 19th and early 20th century by chess historians as well as prominent chess players. Firstly, the author will explore the attitudes of the Jewish people towards chess by comparing three writings: The anonymous treatise *The Delight of Kings*, The chess book *Délices Royales* compiled by Léon Holiænderski, and *An Essay on Capital, Labor, and*

*Charity* written by William Steinitz (1836-1900). Secondly, the author will examine the demonstration of Jewish superiority in chess by analyzing a story collected in the *Ma'aseh Book* and an argument presented in *British Chess Magazine*. The next part of this research aims to explore writings of professional Jewish chess players, such as world champions William Steinitz and Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941). However, being aware of Jewish superiority in chess, some anti-Semites attempted to disapprove of such superiority by various resorts. Finally, the author will go through a series of articles entitled “Jewish and Aryan chess,” which were printed under the name of the fourth world champion, Alexander Alekhine (1892-1946), to examine how the racism towards the Jewish people reflected through chess.

## **2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHESS IN JEWISH CULTURE**

Whether playing chess conforms to the ideology of Jewish culture and religion, and whether chess should be allowed to play, was controversial before the early modern period in Europe. Early Jewish historical writings about chess tend to relate chess to dice, board games and gambling when discussing the moral aspect of playing chess. These writings normally featured instructive stories followed by exhaustive discussions.

The treatise *The Delight of Kings* is a typical example of early Jewish chess writings. It presents an argument of whether chess is a proper game for Jewish people to play.

The treatise is anonymous, and the dating of the treatise is debatable. According to chess historian Abraham Victor Keats, the chess rules mentioned in this treatise are identical to the modern rules introduced in the Renaissance, such as pawn can advance two squares on its first move, the bishop can move up to any square in diagonal, and the queen's movement gains a large extent of freedom. [1] Therefore, this article is likely to be written in the sixteenth century. During this period, the religion aspect was still a big concern for Jewish chess players.

A notable writing approach of *The Delight of Kings* is that it constantly reveals concerns about religious aspects. The author first acknowledges that he held negative attitudes towards chess in his early years for religious reasons. In fact, Jewish chess players were subject to rules from Judaism in the Middle Ages. Judaism indeed held suspicious attitudes towards chess for two reasons: first of all, chess was considered similar to dice and board games to some extent, which sometimes could even involve gambling, and second, playing chess might become a frivolous activity[2]. Indeed, chess was not banned by the laws of Judaism. Chess was popular entertainment for Jewish people in the Middle Ages, and several Jewish players were skillful at chess. However, in *The Delight of Kings*, the author has to prove that chess was not only playable, but also beneficial to play and not contradictory to any doctrines of Judaism. In this sense, the author presents himself as a person of morality who necessarily conforms to the highest standard of Judaism.

Then, the author states that he later challenges his attitude of his early years and is to prove that playing chess is not contradictory to Judaism and is beneficial. He argues that chess should be regarded as a benign alternative to cards, dice and other board games, and unlike these games of chance, chess requires wisdom and skills. His emphasis on "wisdom" conforms to the religious value, for wisdom is an important element and the symbol of great people in the belief of Judaism. More importantly, he argues that playing chess efficiently prevents one from indulging in cards, dice, and board games, which not only waste time, but also entangle the sin of gambling in Judaism.

Writings of Jewish chess history in the 19th century maintain a similar ideology as *The Delight of Kings*. The chess book *Délices Royales* compiled by Léon Holiænderski in 1864 lists the benefits of playing chess and explains the rules of how to play chess. Similar to *The Delight of Kings*, *Délices Royales* depicts chess as "royal game" and "noble game", the most superior of all mental games. The purpose is to make the rules clear to Jewish people and urge more Jewish people to play chess.

However, different from writings in the 16th century, *Délices Royales* contains fewer religious connotations, but focuses more on the significance of chess to Jewish people. In addition, different from *The Delight of Kings*,

which uses descriptive language to describe pieces and rules, *Délices Royales* uses artistic language and depicts the chess game as a romantic battle. This can be related to the fact that chess in the 19th century entered the era of Romanticism, where amateur chess players enjoyed watching and playing in a way with beautiful sacrifices and combinations. In this sense, *Délices Royales* regards chess as an art of combination rather than a game of science.

On the other hand, professional Jewish chess players in the 19th century provided a slightly different point of view regarding the significance of chess. For example, the Jewish world champion William Steinitz regards playing chess as tenuous and stressful. In his *An Essay on Capital, Labor, and Charity*, Steinitz reflects upon his own experience of mental distressing and serious illness derived from chess, and argues that professional chess players experience more pressure and harms on brain and nerve than players of athlete sports. Different from *The Delight of Kings* and his contemporary writing *Délices Royales*, which only regard chess as benign and healthy, Steinitz emphasizes the potential harm chess can bring to professional chess players. Indeed, Steinitz perceives chess as a sport and as an official tournament for competition, which requires a higher level of skills and more effort, rather than leisure, as chess historians and amateur chess players perceived.

In addition, in *An Essay on Capital, Labor, and Charity*, Steinitz argues for the importance of sponsors for prominent chess players. It should be noticed that his argument was contradictory to Jewish chess writers early in the 16th century, who believed that chess should not be played for money for religious reasons. This reveals that Judaism no longer played a crucial role in Jewish chess players' perception of chess in the 19th century. But rather, Steinitz took chess as a life-long occupation for money making, and emphasized the competitive nature of chess.

Taken the sources *The Delight of Kings*, *Délices Royales*, and *An Essay on Capital, Labor, and Charity*, it can be revealed that chess had been a traditional game in Jewish history, but its conformity to Judaism values was debated for centuries until the 19th century. Jewish chess historians in the 19th century had reached a consensus that playing chess was beneficial. However, different from amateur chess players and writers, who tended to regard chess as more of a beneficial entertainment, professional chess players, such as Steinitz, tended to take chess as a series of competition and occupations.

### **3. DEMONSTRATION OF JEWISH SUPERIORITY AND ZIONISM IN CHESS**

Among the Jewish community, there is a story relevant to chess dated back to the early 14th century collected in the *Ma'aseh Book*. It had been modified in

the following centuries and was first published in the 17th century. [3] One version of the story is insightful for the study of Jewish capability in chess. It is about a Jewish boy who was stolen by a Christian servant and was cultivated by Christian Pope. His father, a great chess player Rabbi Simeon, was summoned by the Pope for pleading a case for Jewish people. He played a chess game against the Pope and he was defeated. Rabbi Simeon marveled at the Pope's skills in chess and thus realized that the Pope was a Jew. Finally, the Pope revealed his identity to his father and claimed his willingness to return to Judaism.

In fact, this story may not be historically accurate, and the method of historical writing and later compilation is similar to that of historians of Medieval Europe, characterized by directly citing a source without analyzing the accuracy of the source. But it is this methodology of history writing which provides useful insights into Jewish preference of selecting the sources and Jewish attitude towards chess. It should be noted that the original legend did not entail any elements of chess. [4] The incorporation of chess into the legend in the 17th century reveals that chess was widely played by Jewish people and had become a symbol of Jewish culture. In addition, the story makes the point that Rabbi Simeon believed that only Jewish people could play excellent chess and could defeat him, which somehow reveals the Jewish perception of Jewish superiority in chess.

It is notable that this story is regarded as valuable by Jewish chess players and was preserved for centuries, which in some ways influenced Jewish chess players in the 19th century and made them realize that chess was a useful tool to reveal superiority and promote Zionism. However, it should be noted that such demonstration of superiority is not a nature rooted in Jewish culture, but it was precipitated as the accumulation of the hatred towards the Jews and was induced by racial oppression towards the Jews, which was aggravated in the 19th century. It was for the purpose of combating anti-Semitism. When nationalistic historical writing method appeared in a range of nations in Europe, such as the demonstration of the superiority of the Germanic ethnic group, Zionism, the promotion of Jewish nationalism, was also emphasized in Jewish history writings.

An article published in British Chess Magazine September 1918, 'The Parallel Progress of Chess and Civilization' written by the France chess master Alphonse Goetz, attempts to prove Jewish superiority in chess for the purpose of combating anti-Semitism. Goetz demonstrates such superiority by examining data and the list of prominent Jewish players. In this way, Goetz argues that the existence of anti-Semitism theories is not reasonable and cannot be properly justified in the face of realities. It is notable that Goetz relates Jewish achievements in chess to the emancipation of the Jews, and thus demonstrates Jewish nationalism through chess.

However, German English chess player and writer the Julius du Mont challenged Goetz's argument of Jewish superiority in chess in British Chess Magazine March 1919. Mont emphasizes the fact that non-Jewish players outnumbered prominent Jewish players, and thus denied Goetz's theory of Jewish superiority in chess. However, it should be noticed that his writing is without strong attitudes of anti-Semitism or racism. This is different from most nationalist history writings in the 19th and early 20th century, which emphasize the superiority of a specific ethnic group, while exaggerate or fabricate the inferior aspects of other nations or ethnic groups. But rather, Goetz acknowledges the great achievements of Jewish players in chess, while at the same time, avoids overemphasis on Jewish superiority. It can be revealed that he attempts to write chess history in an unbiased way, without entangling the spirit of Zionism or anti-Semitism.

To recapitulate, Jewish chess writings embody the demonstration of Jewish superiority in chess in the 19th century, mainly to promote Jewish nationalism and combating anti-Semitism.

#### **4. THE POINT OF VIEWS FROM PROFESSIONAL JEWISH CHESS PLAYERS**

The first world champion, Jewish player William Steinitz described in one of his papers published in the 'Berliner Anzeigung' that the prevalent attitude of anti-Semitism in Europe had severely affected his feelings in chess tournaments, and he presents his hope to write a book about Jewish chess players to combat anti-Semitism. [5] It reveals that he identifies himself as a Jew, and writes about chess history from a collective perspective, that is, from the benefit of the Jewish community, rather than an individual perspective. In addition, he incorporates the idea of nationalism into chess, and demonstrates the interrelationship and interactions between nationalism and chess.

In his other writing An Essay on Capital, Labor, and Charity as aforementioned, he stated impoverished situations of great chess players, including himself, and urged for a better patronage system for professional chess players. It should be mentioned that though Steinitz had been the world champion for decades, chess player was not considered a proper occupation at his age. Worse, Steinitz was poor at attracting sponsors to support his tournaments and provide him bonus. Thus, in fact, he lived in poverty for most of his lifetime. [6] It is interesting that in the essay, Steinitz not only mentioned Jewish players, such as Johannes Zukertort (1842-1888), but also had a mention of non-Jewish players, such as Paul Morphy (1837-1884). His purpose is obvious: to make anti-Semitic capitalists realize that this is not a problem specific to Jewish chess players, but to all professional chess players, regardless of Jews or non-Jews. In this sense, Steinitz treated Jews and non-Jews on

an equal basis regarding playing chess. In fact, this essay has another title: *My Advertisement to Antisemites in Vienna and Elsewhere* by a Mercenary Jew. Therefore, Steinitz realized the existence of anti-Semites, but rather than directly speaking against them, Steinitz adapted the approach of seeking mutual interests of both sides, thus attempting to convince anti-Semites to provide benefits for Jewish people.

The second world champion, Jewish player Emanuel Lasker held empathy towards Jewish people as did Steinitz. His article written in German, ‘*Jude, Wohin?*’ (Jew, where to?), which was published in New York in 1939, argues that Jewish people should go to the United States to explore more opportunities. In fact, as a Jew, Lasker was expelled from Germany in 1933 and fled to the United States in 1937. [7] It is intriguing that different from Steinitz and many Jewish chess writers, who directly pointed out the problem of anti-Semitism in Europe and promoted Jewish nationalism, Lasker did not have a mention how Nazis prosecuted Jewish people and the progress of the Second World War. But rather, he praised the creativity of Jewish people and praised the United States for being capable of providing more opportunities, implicitly stating that the United States was more tolerant to different cultures and ethnic groups, especially the Jewish people, than European countries, where anti-Semitism theories were prevalent in the early 20th century. Thus, Lasker implicitly reproaches anti-Semitism and the lack of humanity in Europe. However, it should be noted that anti-Semitic sentiments also existed in the United States in 1939, though the extent was less than in Europe under the rule of the Nazis. Given that Lasker had settled in the United States, it is a compelling choice and a wise strategy for him to flatter the United States, in exchange for protection and respect by the United States government.

Therefore, taken the example of Steinitz and Lasker, it can be revealed that Jewish professional chess players concern about the collective benefits of the Jewish ethnic group in their writings, but at the same time, try to avoid words of racism and the demonstration of Jewish superiority, and seek mutual benefits with the non-Jews.

## **5. THE ARGUMENT OF ANTI-SEMITISM**

To understand Jewish strategy of demonstrating superiority and Zionism through chess, it is also necessary to examine the argument of this aspect from non-Jewish side, especially the anti-Semites. A series of anti-Semitism articles, entitled ‘*Aryan and Jewish Chess*’, was published in a French newspaper in 1941. The series of articles presents a dichotomy between Aryan chess, characterized by aggressiveness, and Jewish chess, featured with solidity, and depict Jewish chess as inferior to Aryan chess and the demonstration of a coward. It was printed under the name of the fourth world

champion Alexander Alekhine, who was born in Russia and migrated to France in his twenties. However, it is still debated by chess historians whether the articles were written by Alekhine and whether they represent what Alekhine exactly believed. Indeed, Alekhine had openly claimed in an interview in November 1944 that none of these words were written by him. [8] In a 1946 tournament in London, Alekhine wrote a long letter to the organizer, again denying his authorship of three articles. [9]

However, in the interview published in the Madrid publication *Informaciones* in 3 September 1941, Alekhine claimed that the greatest glory of the third world champion Raul Jose Capablanca (1888-1942) was to eliminate “the Jew Lasker from world chess throne”. But these sources are not sufficient to prove Alekhine’s point of view. It should be noted that the interview was taken place in 1941, when the Nazis power was in control of the whole of Europe, and Alekhine agreed to cooperate with German Nazis in exchange for his safety. [10] Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that Alekhine probably made the statement under the pressure of the Nazis. In addition, Alekhine’s fourth wife Grace Wishaar was a Jew, and it is possible the purpose for Alekhine of making these statements was to convince the Nazis of his loyalty, thus protecting his wife from the persecution of the Nazis. Therefore, it is also possible that the articles ‘*Aryan and Jewish Chess*’ were written by Alekhine, but it was under the manipulation of the Nazis and cannot represent the thoughts of Alekhine. Though whether these articles were written by Alekhine could not be verified, nevertheless, it is undeniable that these articles represent German Nazis’ view towards Jewish chess players.

‘*Aryan and Jewish Chess*’ is a typical example of extreme nationalism writing, which emphasizes the superiority of the “Aryans” and exaggerates the problems of Jewish ethnic groups. However, the methodology of the writing is problematic, and there contains errors in the logic. Apparently, these articles fabricate some facts to serve the purpose of the Nazis. For example, it includes the third world champion, the Cuban player Capablanca in the list of great Aryan chess players. However, according to the definition of Hitler, the “Aryans” are pure Germanic people with blond hair and blue or green eyes, and those traits reflect the most superior status of human evolution. The Slavs, as long as they had lighter hair and eye color, might be counted as the “Aryans” as well. Therefore, it could be justifiable that the writing includes Russian chess player Mikhail Chigorin (1850-1908) and Efim Bogoljubov (1889-1952) as “Aryan” chess players. However, dark hair and dark eyes Cuban Capablanca had nothing to do with the “Aryans”, but was the objective for discrimination and persecution. Thus, the writing approach fails to pursue biological precision, but mentions Capablanca only for the purpose of

presenting him as the opposite of Jewish players, further emphasizing the inferiority of Jewish people.

Another error of the writing approach is that when ‘Aryan and Jewish Chess’ analyzes exception of Jewish players who played aggressively, it solely attributes the reason to the influence by Aryan way of playing; when it comes to “Aryan” players who played solidly and took minimal risks, it solely attributes to the influence of Jewish players. The author fails to provide any proof of the cause and the effect, but only fabricates the “fact” by speculation. Apparently, the author realizes the fact that chess had become a tool for the Jewish people to justify their superiority in intelligence and combat anti-Semitism, while turned such superiority into inferiority in these articles based on the style of playing chess rather than the achievement in chess. This provides justification for Nazis to discriminate against and prosecute the Jewish people.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed Jewish chess history writings of different periods, and has examined how these writings reflect Jewish perception of chess and their identity through their experience with chess in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Jewish writers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were initially dubious towards playing chess, and it was not until the 19th century did most Jewish writers and players regard chess as completely beneficial to play. In addition, the perception of the superior ability of Jewish players in chess had been recorded in Medieval texts, and was emphasized and became the media of combating anti-Semitism in the 19th and early 20th century. Similarly, professional Jewish chess players also emphasized the collective benefits of Jewish people. However, they held slightly different views from amateur chess players and writers, in the aspect that they emphasized less on the superiority of Jewish people. Directing against the demonstration of Jewish superiority, the Nazis side wrote in a way which demonstrated the idea of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism: denied Jewish superiority, but fabricated and emphasized Jewish inferiority in chess, and at the same time, praised the Aryan way of playing chess, which is unreasonable and contains errors.

However, the result of study may not fully represent the point of views of all Jewish chess players, for published writings about and written by Jewish players were few, and were easily subject to the unstable political situations. For example, some Jewish players flatter another players or countries in their published writings for the benefit of their own safety and prosperity, rather than revealing their true point of view. Therefore, the research orientation will focus more on examining private aspects such as diaries and letters of Jewish players.

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