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Chess in the Jewish Refugee camp Landsberg am Lech (1946) and in the Ghetto Terezín/Theresienstadt (1942-1944)

An outstanding research by Siegfried Schönle (Kassel 2024)

Siegfried Schönle - Schach im DP-Lager Landsberg und im Ghetto Terezin / Teresienstadt - frontcover

by Frank Hoffmeister

I. Introduction

When our member Siegfried Schönle read the autobiography of the Jewish painter Samuel Bak (“Painted in Words”, Boston 2001) he noted that the author refers to the second husband of his mother as a “chess player”. Mr. Nathan Markowski hailed from Lithuania and was interned in the Concentration Camp in Dachau (near Munich) during the second world war in 1944-45. After his liberation, he had no home anymore, and stayed in the Jewish refugee camp Landsberg am Lech, located west of Munich (1946). During his research about Markowski Schönle also received a number of chess related documents from the Ghetto Terezin/Theresienstadt (near Prague). During Nazi occupation of Czechia, a great number of the Jewish population of the region was transported there. Most interestingly, Schönle found that a certain Isidor Schorr organised chess activities in the Ghetto from 1942 to 1944. The present book presents the outcome of his meticulous research on both Markowski and Schorr, as well as associated persons. The book is written in the German language and contains many pictures and documents, printed as facsimiles, which have never been published before.

Following up on the first laudatory reaction from Konrad Reiss, published in November 2024 on our webpage ([Schach im DP-Lager Landsberg und im Ghetto Terezín / Theresienstadt \[Chess in the Landsberg DP camp and in the Terezín / Theresienstadt ghetto\]](#)), the low number of copies has already been sold out. As the book is thus not anymore publicly available, it is all the more important to sum up the main points in English. In my view, some substantive points made in this original and high-quality research deserve particular attention among international chess historians.

II. Nathan Markowsky and the chess Olympiad in the Jewish refugee camp Landsberg am Lech (1946)

Nathan Markowsky was probably a strong, but not an exceptional chess player. Based on the research from Nechemia Kasimov (Toronto) and Eugenijus Palecki (Klaipeda) about chess in Lithuania, he did not

participate in pre-war tournaments in Lithuania. However, his name is mentioned as an organizer and sponsor in relation to the chess trip of Emanuel Lasker to the country in 1932 and Markowsky figures in a group photo from that event. A director of a paper factory, he apparently co-financed the stay of the former world champion at Kaunas in November that year (pp. 43-46). When German troops conquered the region that had hitherto fallen under Soviet rule in summer 1941, the Jewish population suffered a cruel fate – numerous massacres reduced their number from 150.000 to approximately 30.000 by 1944, interned in a specific concentration camp for Jews in the city. Markowsky apparently was forced to live there from June 1941 to July 1944, before being transported to the KZ Dachau and then to its outer camp in Kaufering until May 1945.

When the camp was liberated by American troops, Markowsky arrived in the nearby Landsberg am Lech, which would then host many internally displaced persons of Jewish origin. This “Displaced-Persons Camp Landsberg am Lech” existed until 1946, and Markowsky became the new leader thereof. As a survivor, Markowsky bequeathed us two important documents. First, a document typed in April 1945 contains a political chronology of the cruel German repression of his home town (Annex 2). Second, as Schönle shows with documents from the internal journal written in Jiddish (the “Lager-Cajtung”), he was voted into the administrative board as “candidate No. 7” (of 9 candidates). Importantly, during his reign, the “first Jewish Chess Olympiad Landsberg 1946 took place in September 1946 with participants from 15 cities from the British and the American zone. Mr. Aleksandrow (St. Otilien), named “master of the American zone” won this contest with 8.9/9 points. Markowsky himself did not participate. He married the mother of Samuel Baks early 1946 in Landsberg am Lech, and the two emigrated 1948 towards Israel. According to Bak his stepfather, though, lost any relation to reality at the end of the 1960ies, which triggered Bak’s paintings “Schachland”.

III. Isidor Schorr and the chess tournaments in the Ghetto Terzín/Theresienstadt (1942-1944)

Schönle’s research on the fate of Markowsky led his attention also the role of chess in the Ghetto Terzín/Theresienstadt, near Prague. From the documents handed over from the archive, he could reconstruct that Isidor Schorr played a leading role. In 1922, Schorr had published the marvellous tournament book about the tournament in Teplitz-Schönau with over 600 pages. It did not only contain all games annotated by master Grünfeld but also articles about opening theory and the development of other chess topics. In the Vienna Chess Journal it was rightly praised as a sort of “updated” Bilguer, as the famous German handbook of the 19th century could not hold up with the recent discoveries of the hyper-modern school. Described as “Inspector”, Schorr had returned to his home town from the first world war and worked in an insurance company.

When German troops annexed Czechoslovakia in 1939, Prague fell under their control. The Jewish population was forced to move into the ghetto of Terzín/Theresienstadt in phases. In Theresienstadt, the interned Jews were allowed to organise their spare free time. While scientific research related most to the arts, Schönle brings to light that a chess-section was added in summer 1943 as “K/55”. Schorr, who had arrived in 1942, formally led this section and wrote two reports to the internal (Jewish) self-administration in autumn 1943 about his attempts to organise chess in the ghetto (pp. 127-132). Moreover, a report of 1944 from an unidentified author contains a useful summary of the chess activities in Theresienstadt (pp. 158-159). It follows from these three primary sources that Schorr organised chess tournaments in the different barracks, gave lectures on regular intervals about chess topics and tried to bring in more ordinary chess material. A most shocking detail relates that the administration of the Ghetto obstructed the manufacturing of a demonstration board, which forced Schorr to “go private”. i.e. asking an inmate for this

service, who in turn demanded 1 ½ loafs of bread as honorary! This is a stark reminder of the degrading living circumstances in the Ghetto. Some chess pieces in use were actually made from bread (pp. 97-99) or textiles (p. 90). Access to wood apparently remained the exception - only one chess set of wood from Theresienstadt has survived, which seems to have been made in the Ghetto itself (p. 95).

Another important detail of chess in Theresienstadt relates to author of the opening speech of the first tournament in July 1942, the “Vice-President” of “K/55”. No less than Jaroslav Dubsky held the speech, who had been the captain of the Czechoslovak national team which participated in Warsaw 1935! Schönle not only found the handwritten speech, but also secured a translation from Tomáš Raichl, the administrator of today’s archive, from the Czech language (pp. 193-196). Dubsky made the point that not only many of the top class players were Jewish, but almost 50% of the participants in the Olympiad 1935! Dubsky then concluded his eloquent speech as follows:

“We can say with certainty that the high level of chess would not exist without the Slavs and the Jews, that there would not be as much beauty in chess. We therefore have all preconditions with us for the successful development of the art of chess. Let us seize the opportunity, and I am convinced that the beautiful flowers of our royal game will blossom here quickly, even under these circumstances. I wish you a good time at the first official chess tournament in Theresienstadt. Glory for the winner – and honor for the loser.”

We do not know how many inmates heard these wonderful words of encouragement. However, Schönle could share with us more biographic details about the other members of the board of “K 55” namely Albert Lewitt, Josef Trakatsch, and Michal Kraus. Sharing the fate of many other Jewish inmates, Schorr, Dubsky and Trakatsch were transported in autumn 1944 to Auschwitz, where they were murdered before the liberation of the camp in January 1945 by Soviet troops. The pupil Kraus survived and emigrated after the war to the United States. With the transport of Schorr from Theresienstadt, organised chess activities also ceased there.

IV. Conclusion

As already remarked by Konrad Reiss, Schönle’s book shows that playing chess in the Ghetto Theresienstadt was one way for Jewish inmates to try retaining their dignity despite all the humiliation they endured on a daily basis. I would add that the numerous documents presented in this volume show also a strong will of resilience and solidarity. Despite all difficulties Schorr and Dubsky use their pre-war capabilities as a chess organiser and as a captain of the Czech national team to the benefit of their comrades. The holding of the “Chess Olympiad” 1946 in the Jewish refugee camp in Landsberg am Lech is another testimony of this strong will of the Jewish players to exercise competitions in an organised manner. Schönle’s outstanding research therefore contains important details about the role of chess in the occupied territories during the horrible Nazi-time and therefore should be of interest for chess historians beyond Germany.

Siegfried Schönle

[Schach im DP-Lager Landsberg und im Ghetto Terezín / Theresienstadt](#)

Schwarzweiße Wege der Forschung zu Nathan Markowsky und Isidor Schorr

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