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The long-forgotten Turkish chess automaton of the Italian Joseph Morosi



_ Biographie Universelle - title page

by Jean Oliver Leconte

In a previous article on my website ([in French](#)) I wrote about the visit of Kempelen's chess-playing Turkish automaton to Paris in 1783.

During my research I discovered many newspaper articles about a chess-playing Turkish automaton in Paris in the year 1800. At that time [Kempelen](#) was still alive and his automaton had not yet been sold to [Johann Maelzel](#). But curiously, the name of the person who brought the automaton to Paris in 1800 was not Kempelen. In 1783, the newspaper articles mention a certain Anthon (who I have not yet identified). And in 1800, it is a certain Morosi. And that's when I thought something was wrong. And "Hey presto!", in the reference book "[Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne](#)" (Paris 1843), we find in volume 74, page 417 a short biography of someone called Joseph Morosi (26-06-1772 - 27-09-1840) presented as an Italian mechanic born in Ripafratta, a small village in Tuscany. The text indicates:

MOROSI (Joseph), mécanicien, naquit le 26 juin 1772, à Ripafratta, petit village de Toscane. Après avoir reçu d'un de ses oncles, curé de Ca-

LXXIV.

Il construisit ensuite un automate, joueur d'échecs, qui fut jugé supérieur à celui de Kempelen, et valut à son auteur d'être nommé un

— Biographie Universelle - page 417 (excerpt)

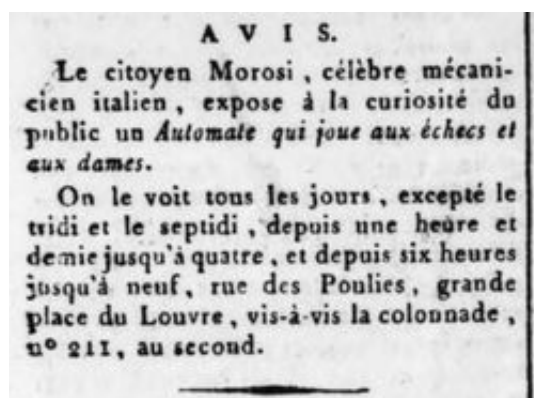
"(...) **He then built a chess-playing automaton**, which was judged superior to Kempelen's, and earned its author the appointment of one of the directors of the Museum of Natural History in Florence, and substitute professor of experimental physics at the University of Pisa (...) After the conquest of Tuscany by the French republican armies in 1799, he came to France and visited the main manufacturing towns as an informed observer. (...) "

From the history of newspaper articles I found on Retronews, we can estimate his stay in Paris from February to September 1800 with good certainty.

But if you check [Wikipedia](#) or other sources, curiously there is no mention of this Turkish chess player automaton of Italian origin. The fact that Joseph Morosi also gave the appearance of a Turk probably created confusion in later research concerning the chess-playing automaton. And nowhere else, for the moment, have I found a mention of this chess-playing automaton. The fact may be known, but it is totally new to me. Could an Italian reader of this website possibly help me with this?

Two automatons in Turkish costume existed at about the same time in Europe, the Kempelen/Maelzel one and the Morosi one. History has only remembered the Kempelen/Maelzel one... Was the Morosi one been presented elsewhere than in Paris? What happened to it? Did he use a chess player from the Café de la Régence as Kempelen did?

Here are some newspaper articles about the visit of Morosi's chess-playing Turkish automaton to Paris in 1800.



A V I S.

Le citoyen Morosi, célèbre mécanicien italien, expose à la curiosité du public un Automate qui joue aux échecs et aux dames.

On le voit tous les jours, excepté le tridi et le septidi, depuis une heure et demie jusqu'à quatre, et depuis six heures jusqu'à neuf, rue des Poulies, grande place du Louvre, vis-à-vis la colonnade, n° 211, au second.

A V I S.

Citizen Morosi, a famous Italian mechanic, exhibits to the curiosity of the public an Automaton which plays chess and checkers. One sees it every day, except tridi and septidi, from one hour and half until four, and from six o'clock until nine, rue des Poulies, great place of the Louvre, opposite the colonnade, n° 211, in the second.

NDA: "tridi" and "septidi" correspond to the 3rd and 7th day of the decade in the republican calendar.

- You have seen men, donkeys, women, horses, sing, dance, and do, I confess, surprising feats of strength; but all these animated beings have natural means, all these kinds of miracles that delight us, they have a spirit, an instinct, a tongue, arms even to perform them! Ah, I ask you, are all these marvels worth a gesture from the Automaton? - Of the Automaton! an Automaton that acts!

- Yes, I saw it, I admired it, and I... I... I was speechless.... An Automaton playing chess and checkers, with perfection!... it is incomprehensible! it is incredible! I played with him, he won me; I made a false step, he warned me by a sign, he put back my piece in its place; I cheated, the gentleman got angry, overturned the chess with anger, and produced on my astonished and delighted mind, an illusion so strong that his anger frightened me for a moment; One forgets, in truth, that one is playing with an Automaton, especially when giving check to the king, he indicates this operation to you himself by a nod of the head, which he repeats twice when he checks you. No combination of the most skillful player embarrasses him, and he puts into his game a dexterity, an apparent application, an exactness finally, which makes all those who see him act in this way, without being influenced by anyone, cry out for a miracle. **It reminds one of the automaton of the famous Kempel; but the young Morosi who renewed and perfected this effort of art, does not know, it is said, the principle of Kempel's automaton. His work is a phenomenon which passes my imagination**, and I cannot think of the difficulty of the game of chess, of the thousands of combinations of which a single game is susceptible, without asking myself again if I have seen correctly; if in the interior ... inside, infinite cogs; I have examined everything, I have seen everything, I have studied everything, I believe, and I do not understand yet. An Automaton playing chess and checkers! What is there not to believe after that?

- Your enthusiasm electrifies me; it gives me many regrets: I agree with you, what you have seen in an hour surpasses all my week's enjoyment; I want to see the Automaton, I will not leave without it, I swear to you.

- I will go with you; I want to see it again, and every day I hope to play my game with this handsome gentleman who was so angry with me; fortunately his anger is not loud; he holds no grudge. I want to mend fences with him, and win him, if possible, a single game.

Note: This Automaton can be seen in the rue des Poulies, large square of the Louvre, opposite the colonnade, n° 211, on the second floor, every day, except on Tuesdays and Fridays, from half past one until four, and from six until nine. The price of the entry ticket is one franc 80 centimes per person.

The Tuscan citizen Morosi, from his earliest youth, invented machines that place him among the greatest mechanics of this century. He had already built, in Italy, a chess-playing automaton, which the Grand Duke of Tuscany, who had paid for it (25 thousand francs), kept in his cabinet. The one that he has just executed in Paris, and that one sees rue des Poulies, opposite the colonnade, has not less perfection, although the author, for lack of pecuniary means, could not use the best materials. Several famous scientists and artists have seen the automaton and admired it. Among them are the illustrious Lagrange, the citizens Prony, Sylvestre and Breguet, watchmaker.

Many people, having no idea of what mechanics and the science of calculation combined can produce, have claimed that the automaton acted by the effect of a few tricks of escamoteurs. We do not include in this class the estimable editor of the *Ami des Lois*, but he says he has discovered the Jarnac trick employed by the author of the automaton, and he announces that he will soon unveil the mystery. We are persuaded that if he complies with the invitation of citizen Morosi, who urged him to go and observe the automaton with the most scrupulous attention and to propose his doubts, he will acknowledge that he was mistaken, and he will hasten to publish that the inventor of the automaton is a man of genius and not a swindler.

[Retronews](#)

Le Courier des spectacles, 25-09-1800 (excerpt)

Citizen Morosi, just recovered from his serious illness, shows again his Automaton which plays chess and checkers. He is a well-dressed Turk, his movements are natural; he plays with the first person who comes along, and gets angry when someone plays against the rules. You can see him in the rue des Poulies, place du Louvre, n°211, opposite the colonnade.