

2007-02-10

Life story of female prodigy Sonja Graf-Stevenson



Schach-Echo 1934 p. 201

Picture 1: Sonja Graf

By Michael Negele (a version from 10th February 2007; an abridged version appeared in Karl 3/2004, pp. 28-34.)

While leafing through some old issues of Schach-Echo I came across a photo ([Picture 1](#)) of a young woman whose enigmatic smile instantly aroused my curiosity. Who was this “Miss Sonja Graf” and why does Dr. Eduard Dyckhoff ([Picture 2](#)) refer to her as “the German champion” ([Text A.](#)) in Magyar Sakkvilág (April 1934, pp. 83-85) when there is hardly any mention of her in German chess magazines of that time?

This was the beginning of my extensive research which revealed some interesting facts about the eventful life of this mysterious figure.

According to some sources, Sonja Graf was born on 15th May 1912 in Munich. This date is also mentioned by Alfred Diel in “The Bavarian Chess Federation – Beginning of the Third Millennium” (2000). However, after consulting the „Chess Personalia A Biobibliography” (1987) things became more complicated. Jeremy Gaige, who has a reputation for being extremely careful, gives 16th December 1914 as Sonja’s birth date, referring to the information in her death certificate. And finally, the third birth date that I came across was 18th December 1912 – this was mentioned explicitly in a laudatory article on Sonja Graf in the short-lived Czech weekly Šachový týden (Chess Week) published on 8th April 1937 before the commencement of the Prague tournament ([Text B](#)).



Magyar Sakkvilág, April 1934, p. 83

Der Stil von Frl. Graf, die von Dr. Dyckhoff seit 1931, in der Tarasch-Schule ausgebildet wurde, ist im Gegensatz zu sämtlichen schachspielenden Damen der Welt kühn, männlich und sehr kombinationsreich; sie zeigt die Phantasie und das Temperament ihrer ursprünglich russischen Abstammung. Oft spielt sie noch zu wild und unausgeglichen, aber ihre grosse Begabung ist unleugbar.

Im Wiener internationalen Damenturnier Juni 1932 hat sie überraschend den I. Preis gewonnen. Im Winter 1933/34 durfte sie, ein bisser in Deutschland noch nicht erlebter Fall, in der Meisterklasse um die Münchner Stadtmeisterschaft für 1934 mit 15 Meisterspielern kämpfen; sie errang immerhin den schönen Achtungserfolg von 6 (aus 15) Punkten und kam gleich hinter den Preisträger. In der letzten Partie dieses Turniers am 14. II. 34 schlug sie den V. Preisträger in folgender, für ihren originellen Stil sehr bezeichnenden Partie.

2179. Spanisch

Herr Kohler

Sonja Graf

- | | |
|-----------|--------|
| 1. e2—c4 | e7—e5 |
| 2. ♖g1—f3 | ♗b8—c6 |
| 3. ♕f1—b5 | a7—a6 |
| 4. ♗b5—a4 | ♖g8—f6 |
| 5. ♖d1—e2 | ♕f8—c5 |
| 6. d2—d3 | d7—d6 |
| 7. h2—h3 | |

Hier unterlässt Weiss mit Unrecht die Rochade. Auch 7. c3 war gut.

- | | |
|-----------|--------|
| 7. | ♕c8—e6 |
| 8. ♗b1—c3 | h7—h6 |
| 9. ♕c1—c3 | |

Nun wäre die Rochade wegen g5 sehr bedenklich.

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 9. | b7—b5 |
| 10. ♗a4—b3 | ♗c6—d4 |
| 11. ♕e3×d4 | e5×d4 |
| 12. ♗c3—d1 | |

Auch ♗d5, c6 13. ♗f6:†, ♖f6: sieht nicht schön aus.

- | | |
|-----------|-------|
| 12. | 0—0 |
| 13. c2—c3 | d4×c3 |
| 14. b2×c3 | |

Nun wäre alles in Ordnung, wenn die e-Linie nicht wäre. Frl. Graf ist jetzt in ihrem Element und das ist der Königsangriff.

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 14. | ♗f8—e8 |
| 15. ♗f3—d2 | b5—b4! |

16. ♗b3×c6

.....
Räumungszug für den ♗d2. Auf d4 folgt natürlich bc.

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 16. | ♗e8×e6 |
| 17. ♗d2—b3 | b4×c3 |

18. ♗b3×c5

.....
Dieser sehenswerte Tripelbauer erweist sich als unheimlich stark; aber 18. ♗c3; ♗b4 19. ♗c1, d5! war noch bedenklicher.

18. d6×c5

19. ♗d1—e3

.....
Oder ♗c3; ♖d4 20. ♗c1, c4! mit Durchbruch.

- | | |
|-----------|--------|
| 19. | ♗a8—b8 |
| 20 ♖e2—c2 | ♖d8—d4 |

21. ♗a1—c1

.....
Wie soll es nun weitergehen? Der Bauer ist anscheinend nicht zu halten und das Spiel löst sich auf. Da folgt nun eine wirklich geniale Kombination!



21. 2f6—d5!! dagewesen!

22. 2e3×d5 22. ♖b8—b2!

Schade, dass Weiss nicht mit dem Bauern nahm! Es wäre grandios gefolgt: 22. ed, ♖e3:† 23. fe, ♗e3:† 24. ♕d11, ♖b2 25. ♖he1, (die Rettung!?) ♗d2†!! 26. ♗d2: ♖d2: Matt. So ein „Epauletten-matt“ ist wohl noch nicht

23. 0—0 ♖b2×c2

und gewann durch das materielle Übergewicht nach weiteren 8 Zügen. Eine Prachtleistung!

Dr. Dyckhoff

Magyar Sakkvilag, April 1934, p. 85

Z galerie zahraničních účastníků turnaje „Šachového týdne“

II. Soňa Grafová - Žena našich dnů

Věříte-li v převtělování duší, můžete v ní nalézt Kristinu Švédskou. Tolik charakterové podobnosti má tato žena, narozená 18. prosince 1912 v Mnichově, s dcerou velkého švédského krále Gustava Adolfa!

Dcera mnichovského malíře slavného jména. Stará povolžská šlechta. Generacími zděděná pudovost a vášeň duše.

Sotva odrostlá dětskému věku, přechá po samostatnosti a volnosti prahnoucí Soňa z domova a probíjí se životem bídě, avšak se zarytou houževnatostí a nevázaným vzdorem.

V rodném domě naučila se trochu hrát šachy... A jednoho dne, toulajíc se s prázdným žaludkem zámožnými čtvrtěmi Mnichova, spatří v okně kavárny dvě tváře, skloněné nad šachovnicí, zastaví se, a s nosíkem zvědavě na sklo přitisknutým provází — sama o tom nevědouc — tah za tahem souhlasným či zamítavým pohybem hlavy.

Pojednou vychází z kavárny několik pánů, přistupuje k děvčátku, a zve je dovnitř. Ke hře. „Ale já přec nedovedu hrát šachy!“, brání se polekaná dívka. „Ne, má milá, umíte velmi dobře, to jsme poznali z vašich očí!“

Vstupuje — bez halče v kapse — do elegantní kavárny. Usedá k šachovnici. A za krátko je celá kavárna vzhůru, žasnouc nad myšlenkovým bohatstvím malého žabce. Zavolají dr. Dyckhoffa a dr. Tarrasche a Sonino štěstí — nebo Sonin osud — je zpečetěno. Stává se šachistkou...

Roku 1932 získává svůj první velký úspěch v memoriálu Pauly Wolf-Kalmarové ve Vídni, kde dobývá 6½ body z 8 partii I. cenu před Harumovou, inž. Reischerovou atd. Pak přesídlí do Anglie, absolvuje turnaje v Hastingsu, v Margate a v Nottinghamu s výsledky neustále lepšími, až nakonec triumfuje v loňském dámském turnaji na Semmeringu, kde vítězí v plavném skoku 10½ body z 11 partií!

Letos hrála už v Hastingsu. Pak ve Vídni. V této chvíli hraje právě v Margate. A za 2 týdny přijede k našemu turnaji do Prahy. Zbrojí na match o dámské mistrovství světa, který sehraje s Věrou Menčíkovou koncem června na Semmeringu a který bude jistě krásným a velmi vážným bojem. Daleko široko není kromě Soni Grafové ženy, která by mohla nyní světové přebornici se zdarem čelit. Se Soňou nebude však Věra mít snadnou práci!

Grafová je zcela jinou povahou, než naše dobrá známá Menčíková. Soňa miluje život, víno a hudbu. Tančí, kouří, flirtuje. Muži bě-



hají za ní v zástupech. Ona však zamítá skvělá nabídnutí k sňatku a chce se vypořádat se světem vlastní silou.

Samotná žena proti světu, který se přiklonil k barbarství. Žena, která odmítá jisté štěstí, aby hledala štěstí v nejistotě. Žena, která by ve středověku skončila na pranýři — a v předválečné době v dívčím pensionátu, zbavena svéprávnosti. Žena, která nemá už nic společného s tím, co náleží nenávratně minulosti, která jest veskrze dítětem dnešní doby, smísejí neklidu a touhy po kráse, ničitelské pudovosti a tvořivé vůli k novému, zániku a znovuzrození.

Tři léta už, od svého 21. roku, jezdí sama po světě. Poznala všechny kouty Evropy, všude má sympatie — a nikde domov... Veselá a drsná, naivní a vzdorná, mužná s něžným ženským srdcem, láskyplně lásky se zřikající, příliš vážná pro malé milostné záležitosti, příliš nestálá pro velké — hle dnešní ženu, hle obraz dnešní doby!

Kahler (bílý) — Grafová (černý).

Z turnaje o championát Mnichova.

1. e4, e5, 2. ♖f3, ♖e6, 3. Sb5, a6, 4. Sa4, ♖f6, 5. De2, Sc5, 6. d3, d6, 7. h3, Se6, 8. Je3, h6,

Šachový týden, Issue 3, 08.04.1937, p. 11



Fernturnier des IFSB 1932, after p. 48

Picture 2: Eduard Dyckhoff

However, there were also indications that Sonja Graf might have been born even before 1912. In the July edition of the *Deutsche Schachzeitung* 1965 (p. 237), Rudolf Teschner gave Sonja's age as 56 years in his short obituary. This was probably based on the information mentioned in the letter to the editor written by a contemporary witness that appeared in the April edition (p.270). And in the above-mentioned *Magyar Sakkvilag* she was referred to as a 24-year old by Dyckhoff, which corresponds with her appearance in later years.

These inconsistencies provided a stimulus for an extensive research in the Munich archives that was carried out with a great persistency by Alfred Schattman. Finally, on 26th February 2005, he was able to quote the following sentence from a letter he received from the Munich City Archives ([Text C](#)):

“The mystery of the origin of the chess player Sonja Graf has been solved...”

The further efforts to cast light on the intricate life story of Susanna Graf (who, later in her life, adopted the name Sonja) were supported by Willibald Müller (also from Munich). It would, however, go well beyond the original intention of this biographical text to mention all the findings concerning Graf's unbelievable family saga made by Schattmann and Müller.

The family of the father, Josef Graf (*23rd July 1869; +9th October 1935 in Munich of consequences of a road accident), came from Liebental, a small village in the Volga region, near the town of Samara (1935-1900: Kujbyschew). His parents Johannes Graf and Barbara, née Paul, were farmers. His wife Susanna Zimmermann (*8th Mai 1876; + 14th February 1953 in Munich) was born in Rownoje (Seelmann), also near Samara. Her father Friedrich Zimmermann was a merchant and he was married to Anna, née Kolsing. ([Texts D.](#))



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Schachspielerin Sonja Graf

Anlage: 9 Kopien

Aktenzeichen (bei Antwort bitte angeben): 394/32/2005

Sehr geehrter Herr Schattmann,

das Rätsel um die Abstammung der Schachspielerin Sonja Graf ist nun gelöst, wobei sie selber wohl auch einen Teil zur Verunklarung dieser Geschichte beigetragen hat. Sonja Graf hieß mit Geburtsnamen Susanna und ist am 16.12.1908 hier in München als fünftes Kind von Josef und Susanna Graf geboren. Die Namen ihrer vier Brüder stimmen und kommen auch in den Meldeunterlagen der Eltern vor. Diese sind tatsächlich in Russland geboren und kamen als Rückwanderer nach Deutschland, wobei sie sich offenbar bereits vor ihrem ständigen Aufenthalt in München hier aufhielten (s. Geburt der Tochter Maria im Jahr 1900 in München).

Für eine Tätigkeit des Vaters als Priester in Russland, liefern die Meldeunterlagen keine gesicherten Angaben. Josef Graf starb am 9.10.1935 in München. Der Sohn Alexander, geboren am 7.09.1907 in Dachau und ebenfalls als Kunstmaler tätig, wanderte im Jahr 1956 nach Australien aus. Nähere Angaben können Sie den in Kopie beigelegten Meldeunterlagen entnehmen.

Die Kosten für die Kopien werden Ihnen mit getrennter Post in Rechnung gestellt.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

i.A.

Löffelmeier
Archivamtsrat

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Ausweis-papiere (Abzugsbescheinigungen sind Seite 2 letzte Spalte vorzumerken):

Verweise
auf Akten:

Familien-
und Vornamen:

Graf Jofas

Beruf:

Einzelhändler für Porzellan

verh., verw. od. gesch.

ledig, evgl.

Name, Beruf
und Aufenthalt
der Eltern:

F. Jofas mit F. Barbara Graf geb. Paul
Landwirtschaf.

Staatsangehörigkeit:
Bei Österreichern
und Schweizern auch
Heimatgemeinde:

Russland mit Bayern & Gumburg evgl.

Geburtszeit und -ort:

23. Juli 1869 (evgl.) Liebenthal
5. August 1869 (evgl.) Liebenthal

Glaubens-
bekenntnis:

Geburts-gemeinde,
Bezirk und Land:

Liebenthal grös. Samara, Russland evgl.

Beruf der Frau:

Ehe geschlossen am 19. 4. 20 19 .. zu Kohn.

laut J. J. des Standes- Amtes 1/8 46 mit

Glaubens-
bekenntnis
der Frau:

Wilhelm Timmermann, ledig

25. April 1846 (evgl.) aus
geboren 8. Mai 1846 zu Rownoje grös. Samara

Eltern, Wohnort: F. Jofas in. Anna F. geb. Kolsing, Timmermann in
Rownoje

Ehe
für nichtig erklärt

geschieden durch Urteil des Landger. v. Proj.-Reg.

Beruf:

Zweite Ehe geschlossen am 19 .. zu

Glaubens-
bekenntnis:

laut des Standes- Amtes mit

geboren zu

Eltern, Wohnort:

Auf die Steuerpflicht hingewiesen: E. U.

Militärverhältnis:

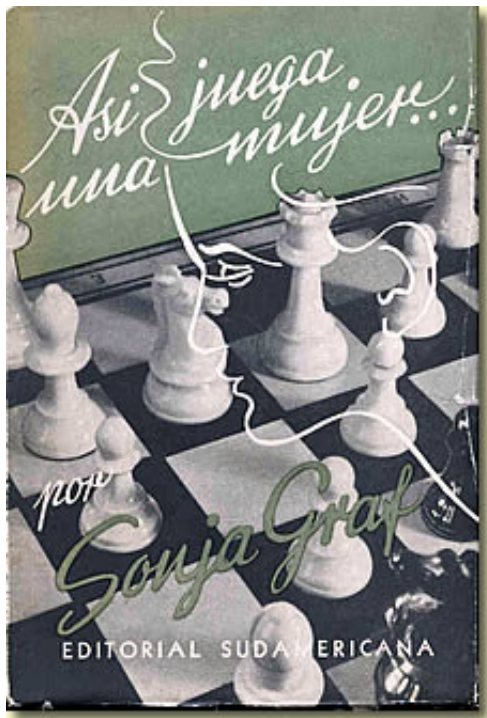
The Munich documents prove without dispute that Susanna (Sonja) Graf was born as Grafts's fifth child on 12th December 1908. At that time the family lived at 22 Ainmiller St. Another three children were later born in Munich: the daughter Helene (*28th February 1910 in Munich, +29th January 1930) – referred to as 'Hella' in Yo Soy Susann on p. 19 – and the sons Cyril (*8th June 1911) and Artur Wolfgang (* 7th October 1912). In January 1915 the big family moved into 45 Elisabeth St. (3rd floor). Officially, the father is referred to as an artist (painter) and catholic priest, later on as magnetopath. On 14th June he and his family, as so called Volga remigrants, were granted the German (Bavarian) citizenship and the parents got married on 19th April 1920 – with eight children (the oldest daughter Maria was already twenty years old!).



— Text E:

Highly interesting is Susanna's entry in the registration file ([Text E](#)): In the section 'occupation' it says 'nanny' and 'art entrepreneur'; later she was listed as 'chess master'.

The motives that brought Sonja Graf to chess are described by her in a great depth in two books that were published in Argentina in 1940's but remained largely unnoticed in Europe. In the first of the two books "Asi juega una mujer ..." (Buenos Aires, 1941) ([Titel F](#)) the author comes across as more or less objective narrator. This book is a cross between a chess handbook, an autobiography and a game collection – it contains 50 commented games by Sonja Graf played between 1932 and 1940. On the other hand, when reading her second book – an autobiographical novel "Yo soy Susann" (Buenos Aires, 1946) ([Titel G](#)) written in the 3rd person - I often found it difficult, and I believe not only because my Spanish is not perfect, to differentiate between fiction and reality.



Titel F: *Así juega una mujer ...* (Buenos Aires 1941)



Titel G: *Yo soy Susann* von 1946

In this book, Sonja explains that her father was a Russian orthodox priest when he fell in love with her mother, who came from a Belarusian family, and therefore he decided to abdicate his office. As the family of the mother was against this relationship, the young couple left Russia and emigrated to Germany. In Munich, the Bohemian father, who cared very little about the mundane tasks of every-day life, did not always earn enough money to support his large family – first he made a living as a painter, later as a hypnotist and magnetizer. Reportedly, Sonja's mother gave birth to 14 children but only eight of them

survived early childhood.

Sonja learned to play chess in her family when she was only five or six years old; her father had a reputation of being a keen chess player. However, years later, when she wanted to visit the Munich chess club together with her older brothers, her father was categorically against it: ([Picture 3](#))



Chronik München 1936

Picture 3: Café Stefanie

“A young girl who wants to play chess against men – impossible!”

Sonja, however, regarded chess as a unique chance to rebel against the social conventions imposed on a young woman and, at the same time, an opportunity to escape the rather unfortunate family circumstances. An article by Beth Cassidy published in the British Chess Magazine 1964, p. 206 gives very colourful details of this ([Text H](#)).

The story of her escape from her family home when she was 16 (?) and the background of a possible trial against the father of one of her girlfriends (on incest charges), which is mentioned in „Yo soy Susann“, has not been clarified yet. Apparently, the young Susanna, who was often seen in the bohemian and amusement suburb Schwabing, was charged with perjury or possibly another criminal act that she might have committed as a minor. There is a written proof of Susanna’s placement in a catholic relief centre München-Thalkirchen (Maria-Einsiedelstrasse 12) on 26th November 1926, which means when she was almost 18 years old ([Text I](#)).

In September 1927 Susana Graf was placed in the approved school of “Zeller Sisters”, an affiliated order of Oberzeller Grey Friars, which was located in the baroque castle Kirschönbach (by Kitzingen) from 1923. The time spent by the nuns is described in great detail in „Yo soy Susann“ – even the names of the “good” and “bad” sisters, Gunthildis (Leykauf, 1897-1976) and Chrysologa – in the book referred to as Grisologa (Schönfelder, 1894-1973) proved to be authentic. Susanna was officially released from the Kirschönbach school on 14th January 1930, which was shortly before the death of her sister Helene. But even before her release Susanna was registered at her parent’s address again (from 1st November to March 1931).

Game No. 13,612.—Queen's Indian Defence.

White: Sonja Graff Stevens. Black: M. Karff.

1 P—Q 4	Kt—K B 3	14 K R—K 1	Kt—K 5	27 P—B 4	R—Q 1
2 Kt—K B 3	P—K 3	15 Kt×Kt	P×Kt	28 Kt—B 3	B—Q 3
3 B—B 4	P—Q Kt 3	16 B—R 6	Q—B 2	29 R—R 5	P—K R 3
4 P—K 3	B—Kt 2	17 B×B	Q×B	30 Kt—R 4	R—B 3
5 Q Kt—Q 2	B—K 2	18 Kt—B 4	B—K 2	31 Kt—B 3	P—R 4
6 B—Q 3	P—Q 4	19 P—R 3	P—Q Kt 4	32 P—K Kt 4	Q—K B 2
7 Q—K 2	P—B 4	20 Kt—Q 2	P—B 5	33 P—Kt 5	Q×R
8 P—B 3	Q Kt—Q 2	21 P—B 3	P×P	34 P×R	Q—B 2
9 O—O	Kt—R 4	22 P×P	Q—B 2	35 P×P	Q×P
10 B—Kt 3	Kt×B	23 Q—R 2	P—B 4	36 Q—R 3	K—B 2
11 R P×Kt	O—O	24 K—B 2	R—B 3	37 R—K Kt 1	Q—R 2
12 Q R—Q 1	Kt—B 3	25 R—K R 1	R—R 3	38 Kt—Kt 5 ch	Resigns
13 Kt—K 5	B—Q 3	26 Q—Kt 2	R—Kt 3		

The winner, Mrs. Sonja Graff Stevens is delightfully Bohemian. Born in Germany, she learned chess from her father and brothers. At sixteen she ran away from home. Her flight across Munich was arrested by the sight of people inside a cafe club playing chess. She watched through the window for an hour or so—having nothing more pressing to do at the time, and then she was invited in for a game. Sonja was pitched against one of the stronger players in the club and fascinated the lot of them by playing P—K 4, P—Q 4 simultaneously as her first move. When the one pawn at a time rule was explained to her she got under way again and beat her opponent soundly. She played until the club closed at midnight and then left "to meet her brother." When the last player had left the club, she slipped back in and slept on the floor where she was discovered next morning by the kindly housekeeper who, taking a fancy to her, supplied her with a blanket and pillow. For nine months Sonja lived as the unsuspected guest of the club, leaving it every morning at 9 o'clock and returning when the club officially opened at ten. She played fourteen hours of chess a day and survived on the coffees and cakes supplied by her opponents, leaving always at midnight to meet the brother! It was in this club that she met Tarrasch who constantly urged her to study the game, but his encouragement fell on deaf ears—Sonja would not give up valuable playing time to books. However, one thing he said remained with her always: "If you cannot see a good move—you are bound to make a mistake."

Then Sonja won a major competition which netted her enough to rent a room. This win also resulted in her being invited hither and yon to play and she became one of the only women ever to become a professional chess-player. She eventually finished up in Argentina at the Chess Olympiad in 1939. Because she was all the things a good little Nazi was not, Hitler took time out to sign an order saying that Sonja did not represent Germany. "Tonterias!" replied the Argentinians, which is a polite way of saying "Nuts to that!" and they insisted that she play under the flag of "Liberty" which she did taking second place to Vera Menchik in the tournament. She then gave a fifty-board simultaneous there, winning 49 of the 50 games.

Sonja has a very fine tournament record, having beaten Gideon Ståhlberg once and twice drawn with him; she has also beaten Palau, Rossetto, Czerniak, and Luckis and drew with Roberto Grau. Sonja lived in Argentina until she married and came to the U.S. Here she won the U.S. Women's Open Championship four times and drew for first place in the 1957 Women's Zonal Tournament.

New York is a great place for private matches. Somebody says "Anything you can do



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29. Juli 2005

Susanne (Sonja) Graf-Stevenson

Sehr geehrter Herr Schattmann,

aus dem Urlaub zurückgekehrt fand ich Ihren Brief vor. Sie suchen nach Unterlagen von Frau Sonja Graf Stevenson, die in unserem ehemaligen Fürsorgeheim Kirchschnönbach war.

Im allgemeinen besitzen wir aus dieser Zeit **wenige** Unterlagen. Ich habe einige Eintragungen über Frau Graf gefunden, die ich Ihnen mitteilen möchte.

Susanne Graf, geb. 16.12.1908 in München, war die Tochter der Kunstmalers-Eheleute Josef und Susanne Graf, geb. Zimmermann.

Susanne Graf kam am 26.11.1926 in das Fürsorgeheim München-Thalkirchen. Am 13. (15.?) September 1927 wurde sie in das Marienheim Kirchschnönbach verlegt und am 14. Januar 1930 zu ihren Eltern nach München entlassen.

Auf einer nicht unterschriebenen Abschrift stand folgender Bericht:

Bestätigung

*Graf Susanne, geb. 16.XII.1908, weilte vom 15.IX.1927 bis 14.I.1930 in unserem Hause. Während dieser Zeit nahm sie an allen praktischen und theoretischen, hauswirtschaftlichen Unterrichtsstunden teil. Sie erwarb sich gute Kenntnisse in allen genannten Zweigen und zeigte besonderes Interesse für schriftliche Arbeiten. Graf Susanne zeichnete sich im Besonderen durch opferwillige Leistungen und großen anhaltenden Fleiß aus.
Marienhaus Kirchschnönbach, den 15. Januar 1930*

Die Leitung

Weitere Angaben kann ich Ihnen nicht machen.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Schw. M. Erentrud Iselt

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It is not known when exactly Sonja took a serious interest in chess. It is not surprising that the male world became soon aware of the attractive young lady. On 27th May 1931 Sonja played the first game of what was supposed to be a ten-game match against another Munich amazon Johanna Müller. The match,

however, ended prematurely with retreat of Sonja's opponent who was losing 0-3. Sonja thought it was because she felt mentally exhausted but the official version that was published in the Bayerische Schachzeitung (in Bayerischer Staatsanzeiger of 21st /22nd June 1931) says:

“We have received the following press release from the Munich Women's Chess Club: The retreat of Miss Müller from the Müller – Graf match was the result of the initiative of the women's chess club who still holds the opinion that a Munich women's champion match should not be organized by private individuals...” (contributed by W. Müller)



Tarraschs Schachzeitung, March 1934
Picture 4: Siegbert Tarrasch

During the year of 1931 Sonja was also introduced to the “teacher of the chess world”, Dr Siegbert Tarrasch ([Picture 4](#)). At that time Tarrasch could be found almost every afternoon in Café Rats that was located in the hotel Peterhof in Marienplatz (from 1923 on called “Tarrasch-Club”). Very soon, Sonja became a member of the renowned circle of chess youths, who had the privilege, along with the professor Hermann Geist and Dr Eduard Dyckhoff to join the chess table of the seventy-year old grandmaster for group analyses. This is also reported in the Chronicle of the Munich Chess Club from 1961.

In his last years (+ 17.02.1934) Tarrasch acted as one of the mentors (the main being Dr Dyckhoff) of this exceptionally talented young lady. Apparently, he was so impressed by Sonja's combinative talent that he repeatedly published examples of nice tactics from her games in Tarraschs Schachzeitung. In the first year (1933) puzzles no 75, 121, and 137, and in the second (and last) year puzzles no 3, 15, and 27.

At an early stage of her chess career, on 26th July 1931, Sonja Graf was given the opportunity to read Dyckhoff's essay on “women's chess” on Bavarian Radio. The text was also published in the Deutsche Schachzeitung (DSZ) 1932, pp 33-37. Around the same time she got involved in the project “Spiritual Aid, Department of Chess” whose aim was to fight the spiritual poverty of unemployment (DSBl. 1931, p. 331-2); in his report “Social Chess” (Tarraschs SZ no.5, 1932, p.67) Dyckhoff says:

“... What patience and devotion does Miss Graf demonstrate at the Cenovis Works (a food factory – W. Müller) every Wednesday, explaining chess theory and showing beautiful games on the display board for full three hours!”

There is also a proof (found by W. Müller) that Sonja Graf took part in the open division III of the Munich championship as a representative of the Munich Chess Club in autumn 1931.



DSZ 1930

Picture 5: Rudolf Spielmann

Another public appearance of Sonja's turned into a great spectacle for Munich chess players: on 13th February 1932 the Austrian grandmaster Rudolf Spielmann ([Picture 5](#)) gave a simultaneous display on 31 boards (+14, -5, = 12); Sonja, who played with White, defeated him convincingly. This made such a profound impression on Spielmann that when he, shortly afterwards, wrote a laudatory article on the occasion of Tarrasch's 70th birthday (published in Tijdschrift van den Koninklijken Nederlandschen Schaakbond, March 1932), he also gave credit to Tarrasch for the growing strength of amateur players, highlighting his own defeat by the female chess star, which was anything but a demonstration of his gallantry.

After this, Sonja Graf did not take long to prove her exceptional talent when compared to her female competitors. On 12th April 1932 Spielmann gave another simultaneous display in Munich (this time in Café Gasteig – W. Müller) and although he obviously wanted to get revenge for his defeat earlier that year, he ended up losing the second game as well. What followed was an invitation for the young Munich chess player – initiated by Sonja's mentor Tarrasch – to the Paula Wolf-Kalmar Memorial tournament in Vienna.

Sonja won this women's tournament in an impressive way with 6.5 points out of 8 ahead of the Austrian Gisela Harum ([Picture 6](#)). The Wiener Schachzeitung (p. 219) reported enthusiastically:



WSZ 1932 p. 220

Picture 6: Paula Wolf-Kalmar Gedenkturnier 1932

“The most remarkable phenomenon of the women’s tournament held in the chess club Hietzing was the character of the winner, Miss Sonja Graf. From Russia by origin, Sonja Graf lives in Munich now where she has, under the guidance of her tutors Dr. Tarrasch and Dr. Dyckhoff, developed into a respected player. In Vienna, she showed beyond doubt that the fame which preceded her was well-deserved. True, she does not compare with the women’s world champion Vera Menchik yet, but the chess development of Miss Graf is by no means completed and given her good dispositions, it is quite possible that in the foreseeable future she will achieve the high level of the present women’s world champion. ...”

Sonja’s first appearance in Vienna is also captured with a lot of details in Hans Kmoch’s “brief retrospection” on women’s chess ([Text J](#)) in the Deutsche Schachzeitung 1973 (issue 2, pp 56-59), which came out almost on the same day as the Vienna master died in New York (+ 13th February 1973).

der Olympiade von Prag 1931. Wir pflegten uns freundlich zu begrüßen, kamen uns aber nie näher.

Weltmeisterin Vera Menchik-Stevenson fand bekanntlich im Jahre 1944 ein jähes Ende in London: sie wurde zusammen mit Mutter und Schwester das Opfer einer Raketenbombe.

Die schärfste Rivalin von Vera Menchik war eine andere Halb-Russin, die 1912 in München geboren Sonja Graf. Sie war eine Schülerin des berühmten Fernspielers Dr. Dyckhoff, sehr begabt, gleich Vera sehr unternehmend und fast ebenso stark, aber zum Unterschied von dieser dem Aussehen und Gehaben nach eher von männlicher Art.

Ich lernte Sonja Graf kennen, als sie eines Tages in Wien erschien, als Gast von Spielmann auftretend. Dieser wußte nicht, wie er zu der Ehre kam und was mit dem Gast beginnen. Er beachte Sonja zu mir, auf daß sie in meiner Frau eine Gesellschafterin habe. Spielmann wohnte in meiner Nähe, und wir pflegten zu drei dieselben Gaststätten zu besuchen. Das geschah nun zwei Wochen lang zu viert, wobei mir auffiel, daß Sonja Graf, damals ein Mädel von vielleicht zwanzig Jahren, hier konsumierte wie ein Student mit sechs Schüsseln. So etwas mag vielleicht in München kein Aufsehen erregen, oder noch weniger irgendwo in dem Bierland Belgien, aber was eine Wienerin ist, benimmt sich gerade in Bezug auf Biergenuss äußerst zurückhaltend, sie bestellt gewöhnlich ein kleines Glas, leert es aber nur zur Hälfte.

Mehr als dreißig Jahre später sollten mich die Umstände stark an diese Mahlzeiten zu viert erinnern.

Ich sah Sonja noch in Nottingham 1930, wo sie an einem der Wettbewerbe teilnahm, die das Meistertum begünstigen. Ihr Turnier wurde jedoch in einem Nebenraum abgehalten, und ich hatte keine Gelegenheit, ihr Spiel zu verfolgen. Als sich am 20. Juli 1939 die europäischen Mannschaften in Antwerpen ein-

schifften um an der Olympiade in Argentinien teilzunehmen, reiste auch Sonja Graf mit, wie so viele andere kehrte sie nie wieder zurück. Sie blieb lange Jahre in Argentinien und brachte das Damenschach einen weiteren Schritt vorwärts indem sie als erste weibliche Person zwei Schachbücher verfaßte.

Wie der Zufall es schon will, wurde Sonja Graf, gleich der damals schon seligen Menchik, ebenfalls eine verheiratete Stevenson. Aber dieser Mann, kein Verwandter des Stevenson-Menchik, war Amerikaner. Sonja lebte nun in Kalifornien und nahm als Angehörige der Vereinigten Staaten an den Damen-Meisterschaften des Landes teil, die Spitze behauptend, aber nur knapp. Ihr letztes Auftreten bei einer solchen Gelegenheit fand 1965 statt. Sonja gewann.

Die 1965 Championship wurde zum Teil im Manhattan Chess Club in New York abgehalten, wo ich mittlerweile Sekretär geworden war und das Spiel zu leiten hatte. Es gab also ein Wiedersehen nach vielen Jahren, aber wir konnten uns gegenseitig kaum wiedererkennen. Sonja war weit über ihre Jahre gealtert und machte einen müden Eindruck.

Sie kehrte nicht mehr nach Kalifornien zurück, wurde vielmehr bald nach dem Turnier in ein New Yorker Krankenhaus gebracht, wo sie nach kurzer Zeit starb. Als Todesursache wurde Zirkulose der Leber angegeben, und das ließ mich wehmütig an unsere erste Begegnung in Wien zurückdenken. Von jener unheilbaren Erkrankung ist nämlich bekannt, daß sie häufiger auftritt unter Menschen, die sich anhaltend Alkoholgenuss hingeben.

Dr. Dyckhoff, der Sonja ins Herz geschlossen hatte und nie vergessen konnte, was ich an einem seiner letzten Briefe entnahm, ist seiner verehrten Schülerin etwa zwanzig Jahre im Tod vorausgegangen.

Vera Menchik und Sonja Graf bilden jedenfalls ein eigenes Kapitel in der Geschichte des Damenschachs.

Deutsche Schachzeitung 1973, Issue 2, p. 59

Text J: Excerpt from Hans Kmoch: Damenschach - Ein kleiner Rückblick

Later on, we will get back to the predictions made by the Wiener Schachzeitung concerning Sonja's future chess career. Shortly after winning the Vienna tournament, she failed to live up to the high expectations and only came second in the women's tournament that was held on the occasion of the 13th Congress of the Bavarian Chess Federation in her home town from 16th to 23rd July 1932. Sonja scored 6.5 point out of 8, a half a point less than the winner Mrs Maja Maintzer (1899-1960, née Sappel, later Schlemmer, German women's vice champion in 1943 – W. Müller), which must have been quite disappointing for her. The first two players were followed by the "field of defeated" who scored 4.5 points, lead by Friedl Benyinger (after her marriage Rinder), who later became one of the German top players (DSBl. 1932, p. 248).

This setback could no longer change Sonja's decision to become the first women's professional chess player in Germany. Soon afterwards, she dabbled with success as a simultaneous player although for obvious reasons, her market value never reached the one of a grandmaster. This is well illustrated by the following note found in the chronicle of the Starnberg Chess Club: "The simultaneous display of Miss Sonja Graf who offered to play against 10 amateur players for 15-20 reichsmarks, scheduled for 23rd October 1932, has been called off by the club."



Friese Schaakkoningen, 1995, p. 100

Picture 7: Simultan Leeuwarden 1933

In the summer of 1933 she was given the opportunity to go on a tour of northern Germany and Holland (Vienna Chess Journal 1933, p. 300). In Holland, which had a lot of chess fans even before Euwe won the world champion's title, Sonja played an exhibition match against Dr. Adolf Olland (1-1) and she gave 7 simultaneous displays. In total, Sonja won 84 games, lost 42, and drew 37, scoring almost 63%. But it wasn't just the remarkable results, achieved against purely male opponents, that impressed the public ([Picture 7](#)). In Hamburg she played another 3 simultaneous displays (+42, -14, =12; which is nearly 73%) and at the end of the year she convincingly defeated the Hamburg women's top player Mrs Ehlers-Giesecke 5.5–0.5, after the first match ended with a draw 2-2 (Schach-Echo, December 1933, p.15).

After this match Sonja Graf came to be regarded as Germany's strongest women's player – an official women's championship was not held at that time. But she also liked to demonstrate her skills in games against the “stronger sex” – in „Asi juega una mujer ...“ she devoted a whole chapter to the intellectual dispute of genders on the board. Quite a few of her winning games from Munich tournaments can be found in German-language chess journals, such as her game against Pesserl (Wiener SZ 1934, p. 34) played in the Candidate Master tournament at the chess club Andersson-Bavaria where Sonja Graf, the only women in the tournament, finished second with 6.5 points out of 9. Dr. Dyckhoff commented on her performance with the following words: “Her style is brave and masculine, at times still too aggressive, but it is getting more solid and sound.”

In the Munich City Championship 1933/34 Sonja achieved 10th/11th place, scoring 6 out of 15. First came Zeuner with 11.5 points (DSBl. 1934, p. 77). This result may look rather modest but one should not forget that apart from Vera Menchik, no other women's chess player of that time was strong enough to be regarded as a decent opponent for the Bavarian chess elite who participated in the tournament. Sonja's brilliant winning game against Kohler, commented by Dyckhoff, was published in Schach-Echo 1934 (p. 201), as well as in above-mentioned Magyar Sakkvilag.

Alfred Brinckmann devoted a lot of attention to the achievements of the young woman in the chess journal Deutsche Schachblätter 1933 (p. 327) where he also attempted to characterise her playing style:

“ ... she has made a rapid progress and nowadays can be regarded as Germany's undisputed top female player. ...

She has a solid yet active style and can rely on good knowledge of the opening theory. The games we have seen so far show strength and an adventurous spirit that could be envied by many representatives of the stronger sex.”

After this Brinckmann made an attempt to provide a general evaluation of women's chess, which might also be interesting for the reader:

“...it has been sufficiently proved that if women are given enough time to develop their skills and if they are motivated, they can achieve a lot. And the fact that they have not reached and will not reach the same level as their male colleagues should not be regarded as some kind of defect but rather as a logical consequence of their mild and tender nature, which was given to them by God as a beautiful present.”

What followed was a detailed analysis of a winning game against Rother that Sonja played in a team event in Hamburg.

From late 1933 Sonja spent a lot of time in this Hansa city, apparently feeling more attracted to the liberal and cosmopolitan life style of the north after Munich had become the so called “capital of the Nazi Movement”. She also got acquainted with the Hamburg chess patron Frierich Ladendorf who became her sponsor and manager, providing her with a place to stay and helping her with the organisation of matches and simultaneous displays. In Hamburg she also found a lover called Wilhelm (referred to as Guillermo in „Yo soy Susann“).



from the collection Mädler, about 1933/34

Picture 8: Sonja Graf and Max Euwe

In the zonal qualification tournament of Northern Bavaria (from 15th to 28th February 1934) Sonja finished last with only half a point from 11 games, which was definitely one of the reasons why she disappeared abroad for some time.

In March 1934, rather unexpectedly and to a great degree thanks to Dr Max Euwe ([Picture 8](#)), Sonja was given a chance to play a 4-game unofficial match against the then women's world champion Vera Menchik. Menchik had received a thorough chess education from the Hungarian grand master Geza Marocz and was well respected even among her male opponents ([Picture 9](#)).

On 21st March 1934 Sonja sensationally won the first game with Black in a convincing manner; it is quite likely that the world champion had completely underestimated her opponent. Max Euwe annotated the first two games of this match in Tidschrift van den Koninklijken Nederlandschen Schaakbond, April 1934:

```
/* Brettbreite an Viewport anpassen */ var breite = window.innerWidth; /* linken und rechten Rand  
einbeziehen */ breite = breite - 20; /* Brettkoordinaten einbeziehen, wenn sie angezeigt werden */ if ('1'  
== '1') { breite = breite - 15; } var pSize = 40; if((pSize*8) > breite) { switch (true) { case (breite  
Elemente der Seite suchen und onchange zuweisen */ window.onload = function() { // Select-Array mit  
allen Selectelementen erstellen var arrSel = document.getElementsByTagName("select"); // Select-Array  
durchlaufen for(var i=0; i < breite) { switch (true) { case (breite Elemente der Seite suchen und onchange  
zuweisen */ window.onload = function() { // Select-Array mit allen Selectelementen erstellen var arrSel =  
document.getElementsByTagName("select"); // Select-Array durchlaufen for(var i=0; i
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