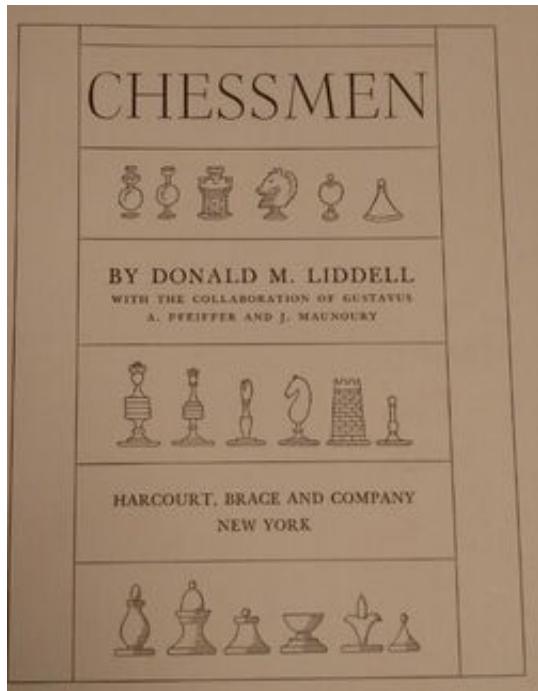


2022-10-31

Searching for Bonaparte's famous chess table at the Café de la Régence



Donald M. Liddell - Chessmen - frontcover

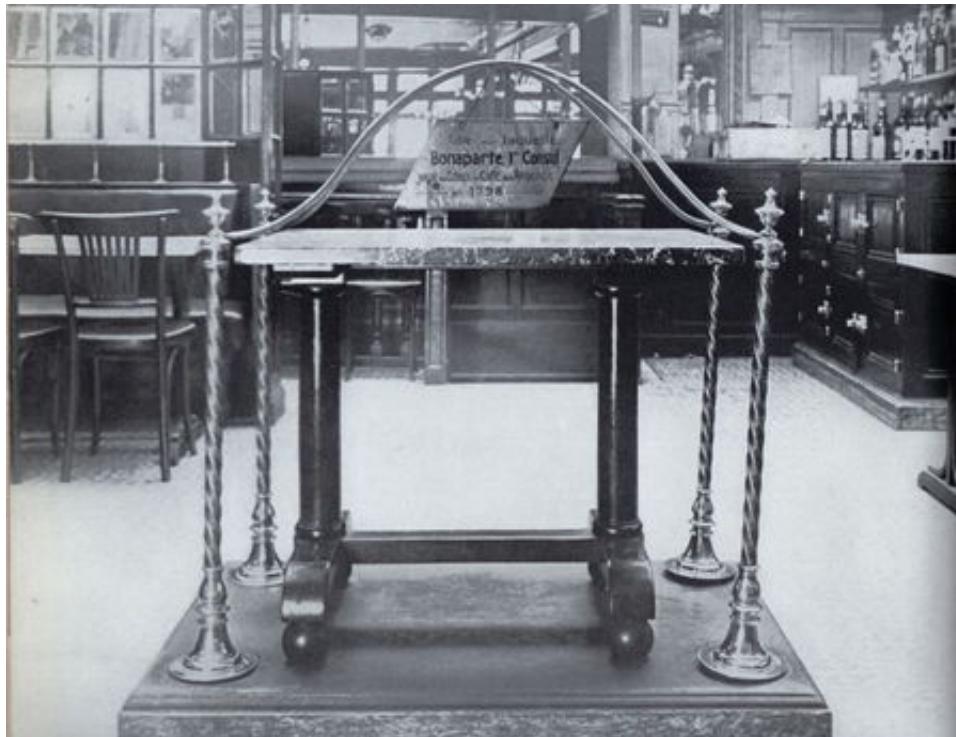
by Jean Oliver Leconte

The table where Bonaparte is said to have played chess at the Café de la Régence was a tourist attraction for almost a century.

Some time ago, Mr. Patrice Belluire (France), whom I thank, gave me a book reference (which I did not know), where this table of Bonaparte appears and in which it is possible to view the interior of the Café de la Régence at the end of the 1930s.

It is the book Chessmen published in 1937 that I bought in a small Parisian bookshop (a copy signed by the author M. J. Maunoury and dedicated to the publisher Harcourt!)

The photo is published on page 59 of the book:



The table is prominently displayed in the café.

And a plaque gives the following information:

"Table on which

Bonaparte 1st Consul

played chess in the Café de la Régence

in 1798".

I still don't know what happened to this table after the Café de la Régence disappeared in 1955. Mr Patrice Belluire thinks he read somewhere that the actor Jean Marais acquired it. Does anyone have any information about this?

Here is a photo I have already published of Jean Marais with the table in the 1950s.

A chessboard has been added and the plaque (on the floor) is not the same one.



Another question about the table is its authenticity.

Did Bonaparte really play on this table? Is it just a tourist trap?

Here is Saint Elme Le Duc's answer in an article written in 1853 and published in 1861 in the magazine "La Nouvelle Régence". He talks about the former Café de la Régence, Place du Palais-Royal.

LA NOUVELLE RÉGENCE

REVUE DES ÉCHECS.

LES OMBRES DE LA RÉGENCE.

.... Campos ubi Troja fuit....
(*Énéide*, liv. III, v. 11.)

Sacrés murs que n'a pu conserver mon Hector!
(*Andromaque*, acte 1^{er}. scène IV.)

31 août 1853.

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LA NOUVELLE RÉGENCE

Je me souviens encore que dans la Régence était une table de marbre sur laquelle on lisait :

Table où Napoléon 1^{er} consul
joua aux Échecs. Café de la Régence.

(sic.) (1)

Mais ces mots, gravés dans les premiers mois de 1853 seulement sur une petite plaque en argent, contenaient, il me semble, une erreur historique. C'est dans certains jours de 1792, 93. 94. 95. particulièrement pendant la disgrâce que lui fit

"(...) In the Café de la Régence itself, there were twenty-two tables and nine pedestal tables. Often, in order to gain space at the back of the café, the area where chess players preferred to sit, two tables were joined by a tin runner, which made it possible to fit three chess boards on two tables. I still remember that in La Régence there was a marble table on which was written:

Table where Napoleon 1st consul
played chess. Café de la Régence

But these words, engraved in the first months of 1853 only on a small silver plate, contained, it seems to me, a historical error. It was in certain days of 1792, 93, 94, 95, particularly during the disgrace suffered by the Conventional (leader) François Aubry, member of the committee of public salvation, in charge of the military part, then of the direction of the armed force, etc., etc., that Napoleon, who had been in charge of the army for several years, was forced to leave the country, etc., that Napoleon, born in 1769, being then twenty or so years old and already of the rank of adjutant-general, but in a state very close to misery (he was then wearing what the military call "valve boots"), came to La Régence to play chess.

It was about sixty years ago. If some surviving witness saw it, that witness would now be over eighty years old. But this witness does not exist. Besides, the young officer, to whom in those days no attention was paid, played sometimes in one place and sometimes in another; he did not have his stool or his table there, as later in the Tuileries he had his throne; consequently each table of the Regency has an equal right to say that it was on it that he played. I could just as well show you the table where (that is to say on which) according to the beautiful, amiable and literate Lyonnaise Pernette du Guillet(*):

Amour avecques Psyches,
Qu'il tenoit en sa plaisance,
Jouoit ensemble aux Eschets
En très-grand' resjouissance.

Love with Psyches,
That he held in his pleasure,
played chess together
In great delight.

It would seem to me that the tradition of this fact has not been transmitted from age to age to the regulars of La Régence. I agree, so I say that it would be somewhat rash to affirm that the table of Love and Psyche was seen, as it is, I believe, to say that it was on the said silver-plate table of La Régence that the disgraced François d'Aubry played. It does not matter, after all, whether it was on this table or on another, no matter that the naive believe it, the fact is that the future hero, the future Emperor of the French, King of Italy, protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, mediator of the Swiss Confederation, regenerator of Poland, etc., etc., etc., came to play Chess at La Régence, as an officer, yes, but as a consul, no. His shadow came back there every day; here it is still before my eyes. Yes, it is indeed his serious face, and as in his youth, thin, yellow and with long black hair (...) ".

(*) 16th century French poetess

