

Footnote Fame

How obscure amateurs earned posts in chess posterity.

BY GM ANDY SOLTIS

CORRESPONDENCE CHESS
are turning up at big-ticket auc-

tions and selling for thousands of dollars. Details of the cross-country game played by Humphrey Bogart remain fuzzy — including how it ended up at the start of his most acclaimed movie.

But it is an example of a happy accident that Bogart's opponent, an obscure, average player from Brooklyn, became a footnote in chess history.

Bogart loved to spend free time with chess. Somehow he connected with postal player Irving Kovner, whose brother worked for Bogart's movie studio, Warner Brothers. Their game began in January 1942, when Kovner mailed 1. e4 from his Coney Island neighborhood. Bogart, in between Warner assignments, replied 1. ... e6 from Hollywood.

By the time he was cast as a cynical nightclub owner in *Casablanca*, chess had been written into and out of that movie's preliminary scripts.

But when filming began in May it was back in the script — in fact, in Bogart's first scene.

The camera shows him in his packed club, studying a chess position on a board. It just happened to be from the opening of the game. **1. e4 e6 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Bg5 Be7 4. Bg5 Be7 5. e5 Nfd7 6. h4 c5 7. Bxe7 Qxe7 8. Nb5.**

(see diagram top of next column)

Bogart hardly looks up from the board as a sleazy crook (played by Peter Lorre) hints at his latest scheme. But a sharp-eyed chess-player can see why the position really mattered to him.

Kovner's last move threatened both 9. Nc7+ and 9. Nd6+. Belatedly, Bogart realized 6. ... Bxg5 had been necessary.



POSITION AFTER 8. Nb5

"My 6 move a bad one. Think should have been BxB. Now I'm in a jam," he scrawled, with his reply to Kovner, **8. ... 0-0.**

Today that one-cent postcard is valuable. Signed "H. Bogart," it fetched \$5,625 when sold at the celebrated Bonham's auction house in 2024.

Few of the other "Dear Irving" cards have surfaced. But there are enough to indicate the game. **9. Nc3 d4 10. Nxd3 Qb4+ 11. c3? dxc3 12. bxc3 Qxc3+ 13. Ke2 Qxe5+ 14. Kd2 Nc6 15. Ne2 d4 16. Nc1 Nc5 17. Nd3 Nxd3 18. Bxd3.**



Bogart's card with **18. ... Rd8** was auctioned for \$4,100 last year. Unfortunately, that's the last clue to what happened in the game. In high demand after *Casablanca*, Bogart became busy with movies and WWII benefit tours. And what about Kovner? We know little:

He had a better-than-average postal rating and was about 50 at the time of the game. Bogart was 42, but called him "kid," as Bogart repeatedly called Ingrid Bergman's character in *Casablanca*. Nevertheless, Kovner belongs in a pantheon of amateurs who have a minor but memorable place in chess history. Another was a 19th-century Londoner who didn't even seem to like chess.

William Greenwood Walker was described by a contemporary as a "very moderate" player who "cared little to play." But he earned his place in posterity because he had Walker was devoted to the play of Alexander McDonnell. An Irish surgeon's son, McDonnell was one of the world's very best players nearly 200 years ago. Walker loved to sit next to him during a game and write down his moves.

When McDonnell challenged a French rival to what turned out to be high-profile matches stretching over five months, Walker wrote down all 3,700 moves, including the most memorable.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT ACCEPTED (D20)

Louis Charles Mahe de La Bourdonnais
Alexander McDonnell
Fourth Match, London, 1834

1. d4 d5 2. c4 dxc4 3. e4 e5 4. d5 f5 5. Nc3 Nf6 6. Bxc4 Bc5 7. Nf3 Qe7 8. Bg5 Bxf2+ 9. Kf1

Better was 9. Kxf2! Qc5+ 10. Ke1 Qxc4 11. Nxe5!.

9. ... Bb6 10. Qe2 f4 11. Rd1 Bg4 12. d6 cxd6 13. Nd5

(see diagram top of next column)

Critics then — and computers today — suspect 13. ... Qf8 is best. But McDonnell's choice was acclaimed as one of the greatest

QUIZ FOR FEBRUARY

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY

prodigies in chess and in music. There have also been a few youngsters who were considered talented in both spheres: Francois-Andre Philidor in the 18th century and Mark Taimanov in the 20th. Because of his youthful proficiency at the piano Taimanov was given an opportunity to excel at chess, with Mikhail Botvinnik as his teacher. On the 100th anniversary of his birth, this month's quiz features six positions from early in his career. Your task in each diagram is to find the fastest winning line of play. This will usually mean the forced win of a decisive amount of material, such as a rook or minor piece. For solutions, see page 63.

PROBLEM 1

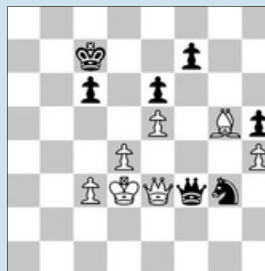
Mark Taimanov
Rapphi Persitz



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 2

Mikhail Tal
Mark Taimanov



BLACK TO MOVE

PROBLEM 3

Mark Taimanov
Lajos Portisch



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 4

Mark Taimanov
Jozsef Pogats



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 5

Mark Taimanov
Abram Model



WHITE TO MOVE

PROBLEM 6

Mark Taimanov
Thorbjorn Gravseth



WHITE TO MOVE



POSITION AFTER 13. Nd5

moves ever played. One reason is there was little recorded chess history to compare it with.

13. ... Nxd5!? **14. Bxe7 Ne3+** **15. Ke1? Kxe7** **16. Qd3 Rd8** **17. Rd2 Nc6** **18. b3 Ba5** **19. a3 Rac8** **20. Rg1 b5** **21. Bxb5 Bxf3** **22. gxf3 Nd4** **23. Bc4? Nxf3+** **24. Kf2 Nxd2** **25. Rxf3** **26. Rf7+ Kg6** **27. Rb7 Ndxc4** **28. bxc4 Rxc4** **29. Qb1 Bb6** **30. Kf3 Rc3!** **31. Qa2 Nc4** **32. Kg4 Rg8!** **33. Rxb6 axb6** **34. Kh4 Kf6** **35. Qe2 Rg6** **36. Qh5 Ne3!, White resigned.**

Why does Walker matter? Because before him, preserving the moves of master games

was rare. The world's best player in the previous century, Francois-Andre Philidor, played thousands of games. But only about 50, from his final years, have survived.

In contrast, virtually all of the serious games of Paul Morphy, played after La Bourdonnais - McDonnell, are available to us today. The tradition of recording important games may have begun with Walker.

Many other amateurs have earned a footnote in chess history because, for example, they lost a much-published game or found an improvement in a grandmaster game. But few became immortal as accidentally as a 17th-century Naples amateur named d'Alessandro.

We know almost nothing about him, except that he once *watched* a game that began **1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Nf3 g5 4. Bc4 g4.**

The book move then was **5. Ne5.** But d'Alessandro saw a master, Geronimo Cascio, try **5. 0-0!?** **gxf3 6. Qxf3.**

(see diagram top of next column)

Cascio apparently won the game after **6. ... Qe7 7. Qxf4 Nh6 8. Qxc7 Nc6 9. Nc3 Qd6**

10. Nd5. D'Alessandro, who was reputedly a weak player, reported what he saw to an Italian master, Alessandro Salvio.



POSITION AFTER 6. Qxf3

Salvio wrote about 5. 0-0 in an influential 1634 book. It eventually became famous most famous in brilliancies of world champions Wilhelm Steinitz and Adolf Anderssen, and others.

But by then, credit for the sacrifice was lost in translation. It could have been attributed solely to Giulio Cesare Polerio, who had analyzed it. Or it might have been named after Salvio or even Cascio.

Instead, it is best known as the brainchild of spectator d'Alessandro. His given name was either Mutio or Muzio, we're not certain.

In any case, we know the most legendary of opening sacrifices as the Muzio Gambit. ♠