

A New Meaning for “Soul Mate”

— Case #24 —

If you’ve spent any time puttering around chess sites on the Web, you might have encountered a story about a game played between two chess masters, only one of whom was alive at the time. Those telling the tale generally assume that it is bogus or was an April Fool’s joke or they find some other way to disassociate themselves from such an outrageous idea. Their ignorance is quite understandable, for the full story was only available in the German language until quite recently.

There are two parts to this story: the interview and the game. The interview contains a great deal of compelling evidence; nevertheless, the game is the more unusual and therefore interesting aspect so we’ll cover it first.

The Game

When an acquaintance came up with the idea for a chess match played across the great divide, Wolfgang Eisenbeiss, Ph.D., thought that a medium named Robert Rollans might be able to facilitate the competition. Eisenbeiss had worked with Rollans for several years, and felt that the medium had the two necessary qualifications: he was trustworthy and he knew nothing of chess. So a list of deceased Grandmasters was drawn up and Rollans’ control was asked to see if any of them could be located in the spirit world and persuaded to play a game. While that search went on, Dr. Eisenbeiss sought an earthbound champion willing to compete against a ghost. Perhaps the most amazing thing about this amazing story is that someone was willing to risk ridicule in the chess world by agreeing to do so. That person was Grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi [a.k.a. Kortschnoi], who was ranked third in the world at the time.

On the 15th of June, 1985, the challenge was accepted by a spirit claiming to be Géza Maróczy (the name is pronounced GEH-zaw

MAHR-ot-see) a Hungarian who had passed from this mortal plane in 1951. Maróczy was also ranked third in the world — during the early 1900s — so the pairing promised to be competitive. [For the rest of this presentation, we will refer to this combination of the medium Rollans and the spirit Maróczy as Maróczy/Rollans, or simply M/R.]

Maróczy/Rollans moved first. (It isn’t clear how the opener was selected; perhaps it was because ghosts are generally envisioned as being white.) The move was communicated through Rollans via automatic writing, forwarded to Eisenbeiss, who passed it on to Korchnoi. When Korchnoi determined his response, he told Eisenbeiss, who told Rollans. Rollans would then go into his home office, write the move on a piece of paper, and make the move on a small chessboard.¹ (Eisenbeiss, an amateur chess enthusiast, had to give Rollans lessons on chess moves and notation so that the medium would understand enough to move the pieces properly.) The communication of each move typically required about 10 days, but Korchnoi was often out of touch (grandmasters travel a lot) and so the entire match took 7 years and 8 months. Maróczy resigned after 47 moves. Just in time too, as Rollans fell ill toward the end and died only 3 weeks after the match’s conclusion.

And how well did the spirit master acquit himself? About as well as one might expect from any champion with Maróczy’s training and background. Those readers proficient at chess play and knowledgeable of chess history can judge for themselves by examining the game.² The rest of us will have to rely on the testimony of experts. His opponent, Korchnoi, made the following observation after the 27th move: “During the opening phase Maróczy showed weaknesses. His play is old fashioned. But ... I am not sure I will win. He

has compensated the faults of the opening by a strong end-game. In the end-game the ability of a player shows up, and my opponent plays very well.”³ Helmut Metz, a well known chess commentator, observed that Korchnoi’s opponent “controlled the end-game like the old masters from the first half of the century.”⁴



Géza Maróczy

Viktor Korchnoi in 1976

Playing chess well enough to make a grandmaster unsure of victory is an extremely rare skill. (Chess playing computers that could threaten a grandmaster were not readily available during those years.) Doing so in an “old fashioned” style could only be accomplished by a handful of geniuses ... if by anyone alive today.

Not to accept these events as convincing evidence of Survival would require believing that some unknown player of immense skill and knowledge would be willing to put his reputation at risk by committing fraud over and over again for almost a decade — and without any recognition or compensation!

Mind reading, even on a grand scale, can’t explain things either. Picking up impressions may be common, and discerning an occasional message from another’s mind is not unheard of, but no one has *ever* demonstrated an ability to learn a complex skill via telepathy.

But wait ... there’s more!

The Interview

At various times over the course of the match, Eisenbeiss asked Maróczy/Rollans to provide information about Maróczy’s tournaments and personal life. M/R’s initial response was to produce 38 hand-written pages of biographical information. From these pages, Eisenbeiss compiled a list of 39 points (later subdivided by Hassler into 92 discrete statements) that he thought might be subject to verification.⁵ These points were sorted into five categories according to the likelihood of the medium being able to guess or discover the information without spirit help. These categories ranged from the sort of facts that could be gleaned from an ordinary encyclopedia (such as Maróczy’s birthplace) through more specialized facts (such as the place Maróczy won in a Monte Carlo tournament in 1903) up to private information shared by few and not known to be written down (such as the level of chess-playing skill displayed by Maróczy’s children, and the sort of job that Maróczy took after he finished school⁶).

Eisenbeiss then set about checking the validity of the spirit’s statements. First, he asked Korchnoi to verify the statements, but the Grandmaster declined the task, saying that he did not know the facts and it would take too much time and effort to learn them. So, Eisenbeiss put the statements into question format and obtained the services of historian and chess expert László Sebestyén to find the answers. Not told anything of the case and never meeting Rollans or Korchnoi, Mr. Sebestyén worked under the assumption that his research was for an article on Maróczy. Consulting numerous specialized libraries and interviewing Maróczy’s two surviving children and a cousin, Sebestyén managed to answer all but seven of the questions. And only three of the historian’s answers differed from the statements given by M/R.

Of perhaps greater significance, when only the more difficult questions — 33 pieces of private or hidden information — are considered, 31 were verified and the answers to the remaining

two could not be found.⁷ None contradicted the spirit's testimony. This gives a confirmed accuracy rate of 94 percent, but if more information could be discovered the rate could well be 100 percent!

Impressive statistics aside, there are a couple of exchanges worthy of special attention. The first revolves around a spelling dispute.

One of the questions involved a match in San Remo, Italy, in which Maróczy made a surprising move that thrilled the spectators and saved a game thought to be lost. For this reason, Eisenbeiss speculated that the game might be recalled by Maróczy, even though it was played almost 60 years earlier against a relatively unknown player from Italy named Romi.

As with the chess move that prompted the question, Maróczy/Rollans' response was unexpected — and exceptionally evidential. Maróczy said that he never knew anyone named Romi, but that, as a youth, he did have a friend named Romih (with an "h" at the end) and that this was the man whom he had defeated in San Remo. So, Eisenbeiss asked Sebestyén to determine the correct spelling of the name.

The historian found a German book and a Russian book that mentioned Romi (sans h) but another one by a Hungarian spelled the name Romih, so he felt the matter could not be settled. Eisenbeiss then took up the hunt himself and discovered two more references to Romi, and was about convinced that M/R was incorrect, when he managed to obtain a copy of the official program of the 1930 San Remo Tournament. Therein, the Italian player was mentioned in several places and his name was always spelled Romih. So Maróczy had remembered the name correctly.

Why this spelling discrepancy had occurred was not revealed until Eisenbeiss found a chess expert from Italy who remembered that Max Romih was of Slavonic origin and had emigrated to Italy in 1918. He hadn't dropped the "h" off the end of his name until after the San Remo tournament. Thus, there was no discord in Maróczy

claiming to have known this Italian player as a youth in Hungary.

The second of Maróczy/Rollans' statements that deserve special attention concerns a female chess champion named Vera Menchik. On the 4th of August, 1988, an ad in a chess magazine asked readers to answer the question: "Who was the Austrian founder of the Vera Menchik Club?" This club was formed as a lark by players who had lost tournament games to Menchik. As Menchik was known to have been one of Maróczy's pupils, Eisenbeiss put the question to M/R.

On the 8th of August, M/R offered two names as possibly the club's founder; neither was correct. On the 11th, he again expressed uncertainty and mentions a Dr. Becker, but rejects him because Becker had moved to South America. Furthermore, M/R described the club as a "silly joke" that had not captured his attention at the time. On August 18th, the magazine answered its own question: the founder of the Vera Menchik Club was, indeed, Dr. Becker.

During a session on August 21st, the subject was again raised and, despite the fact that the answer was now "public" knowledge (at least to those who read that particular chess magazine), M/R remained uncertain of the founder's identity. Instead, he changed the subject and told a most revealing story involving the wife and mistress of another world champion. This story is also quite evidential — as are several others in the report — but we can only examine the strongest evidence in the space we have here.

Salient Points

1. The medium, Rollans, received no compensation for his participation throughout the almost 9 years of the match. Neither, by the way, did Korchnoi.⁸

2. Rollans claimed to have no knowledge of chess, not even the basics of how the pieces could be moved. Rollans' widow later gave written testimony that she had never known him to show any interest in chess or to deliberate over a chess board. Nevertheless, the seemingly "old-fashioned" moves that came through his automatic writing were of sufficient quality to threaten a Grandmaster.
 3. Rollans did not know Korchnoi nor did they have any contact with each other until the eighth year of the match when they met, briefly, during the filming of a television show.
 4. In response to Eisenbeiss' request for some personal information, M/R produced 38 handwritten pages over one afternoon and evening. The historian, Sebestyén, required more than 70 hours of research — in such specialized places as the library of the Budapest Chess Club and the Library of the Hungarian Scientific Academy, plus he had to interview Maróczy's surviving children (each of whom was over 80 years old) and a cousin — to confirm these autobiographical statements.
 5. Of the 85 verifiable points made by M/R, only two were contradicted by the historian's research and both of those had to do with tournament standings — just the kind of dry data most people find difficult to remember. Even so, assuming that the historical sources consulted are correct, Maróczy's accuracy rate was an amazing 97.6 percent.
 6. Even though most of the available resources gave "ROMI" as the right spelling, M/R insisted that "ROMIH" was correct. Reference to a rare copy of the tournament program from 1930 was required to settle the matter in M/R's favor.
 7. M/R stated that Romih was an acquaintance from Maróczy's Hungarian youth, despite the fact that the man played for the Italian chess team. Only via an interview with an Italian chess player were M/R's statements corroborated.
 8. In his initial autobiographical material, M/R gave a great deal of accurate information about his pupil, Vera Menchik; but, when asked who was the founder of the club named after her, he could not recall the correct name. M/R called the club "a silly joke" and claimed that in the afterlife, as in his earthly life, he tended not to remember inconsequential matters. Even when the answer was published and could easily have been found by Rollans with a bit of research (or pulled telepathically from the minds of the magazine's readers) M/R remained unable to give the founder's name.
- Further Analysis** [added in January 2013]: Following the publication of this case, Vernon M. Neppe MD, PhD, FRS(SAf), who is both Director of the Pacific Neuropsychiatric Institute and a chess champion, did an extensive analysis of the game that further strengthens the case. Neppe carried out a detailed computer stimulation in addition to his own analysis and consulted with other chess experts. Chess enthusiasts are encouraged to study his article that was published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*.⁹ For those not so familiar with the game, here are some of Neppe's insights and conclusions:
- "The game was analyzed in detail by comparing the moves with those of a computer that played at approximately low Master level. The generated scores for the moves of the players and those suggested by the computer were compared and ranked for superiority, equality or inferiority. The author assiduously consulted with an outside independent International Chess Master, Leon Pliester, validating ideas, correcting obvious errors of computer judgement and move rankings, and assessing stylistic aspects of the play.
 - "Maroczy played at least at the Master level,... This level could not have been achieved by the

medium even after great training, assuming the medium was not a chess genius. ... not many living chess players could produce this kind of game.

- “A chess computer could not reproduce this game as of the 1980s. Nor is it likely that it could replicate Maroczy's play even today because of the stylistic elements.
- “The availability of expert outside validators by March 1987 (e.g. the Swiss chess champion, as reported to me by Dr Eisenbeiss), when the bulk of the game had been played, is a distinct plus against any hypothesis of fraudulent collaboration. This is a key to proving the chess aspect of this case. The provision of outside evidence early on and the involvement of the news media in that regard is a definite plus.
- “Whereas super-ESP has been used as an explanation for anything and everything, it would require the repeated and active cogitation of a master chess player or players while alive, extended over a prolonged period of time with 47 relevant responses (47 moves in the game), for this to be an explanation. Merely divining this information from the Master's unconscious would not work, as the responses would require active intervention.
- “The combination of the skill of the game plus the correct esoteric data vastly diminishes the potential for explaining the information by fraud as this is likely to have required major collaboration from numerous highly respected people.”

Additional comment [added in February, 2009]: Some have suggested that Rollans could have played as he did by reading the mind of Korchnoi. There are three problems with this idea. First, it does nothing to explain the interview data. Second, it requires that Rollans access Korchnoi's thoughts to an unheard-of degree. And third, if Rollans knew what his opponent was thinking, he should have won!

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For Further Information

Eisenbeiss, Wolfgang and Dieter Hassler, “An Assessment of Ostensible Communications with a Deceased Grandmaster as Evidence for Survival,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 70.2 No. 883, April 2006, pp. 65-97.

Neppe, Vernon, “A Detailed Analysis of an Important Chess Game: Revisiting ‘Maróczy versus Korchnoi’,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 71.3 No. 888, July 2007, pp. 129-147. Also: <http://www.pni.org/research/anomalous/chess/index.html>.

Another Informative Treatment

Hornecker, Siegfried, *The Oldest Active Chess Player Of All Time*, 14 October 2011, on web at <http://www.chessproblem.net/viewtopic.php?f=45&t=515>.

[Endnotes are on page 6.]

[A Survival Top 40 Case](#)

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¹ This process of writing on paper and moving the chessmen was described to the author by Eisenbeiss in an e-mail on 13 November 2006.

² The moves:

1. e4 e6	9. Qxh7 Qc7	17. Ke2 Bxf3+	25. a4 Rxc3	33. Ke2 Ra7	41. Rxf6 Rxh7
2. d4 d5	10. Kd1 dxc3	18. gxf3 Qxe5+	26. fxg3 b6	34. Kd3 Ra2	42. Rg6+ Kf4
3. Nc3 Bb4	11. Nf3 Nbc6	19. Qe4 Qxe4+	27. h4 a6	35. Rf1 b4	43. Rf6+ Kg3
4. e5 c5	12. Bb5 Bd7	20. fxe4 f6	28. g4 b5	36. h5+ Kg5	44. Rf1 Rh2
5. a3 Bxc3+	13. Bxc6 Bxc6	21. Rad1 e5	29. axb5 axb5	37. Rf5+ Kxc4	45. Rd1 Kf3
6. bxc3 Ne7	14. Bg5 d4	22. Rd3 Kf7	30. Kd3 Kg6	38. h6 b3	46. Rf1+ Rf2
7. Qg4 cxd4	15. Bxe7 Kxe7	23. Rg3 Rg6	31. Rf1 Rh8	39. h7 Ra8	47. Rxf2+ Kxf2
8. Qxc7 Rg8	16. Qh4+ Ke8	24. Rhg1 Rag8	32. Rh1 Rh7	40. cxb3 Rh8	0—1

³ Eisenbeiss, Wolfgang and Dieter Hassler, "An Assessment of Ostensible Communications with a Deceased Grandmaster as Evidence for Survival," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 70.2 No. 883, April 2006, p. 67.

⁴ See Metz's Website: <http://www.rochadekuppenheim.de/meke/meke1a/m12.htm>.

⁵ The *Journal* report of 91 points was corrected in an erratum sent by Hassler to the author on 23 November 2006.

⁶ The spirit had correctly stated that Maróczy was a draftsman for a company that designed municipal water mains.

⁷ These unanswered questions asked the name of Maróczy's first love and the name of a café he liked to frequent in Paris.

⁸ According to correspondence from Eisenbeiss, 13 November 2006.

⁹ Those without access to this *Journal* may find a version of the article at <http://www.pni.org/research/anomalous/chess/index.html>.