

Richard Shorman

Chess

RESHEVSKY'S CHESS TESTS

(Many time U.S. champion and international grand-master Samuel Reshevsky has long been acknowledged as one of the few authentic chess prodigies to emerge in the entire history of the royal game. He created such a sensation in Europe for his exceptional chess ability that the child wonder was sought out by Dr. Franziska Baumgarten, Assistant Professor at the University of Berne, for the purpose of administering a series of intelligence tests to determine the nature of Reshevsky's genius. The results of the examination, condensed and adapted from "Chess," March 1939, provided some fascinating insights into what makes Sammy run . . .)

Samuel Reshevsky created a world-wide sensation through the excellence of his chess when very young. When he was a boy of eight-and-a-half years, I had the opportunity of subjecting him to a series of intelligence tests.

Reshevsky came in 1920 from Poland, his native country, to Berlin, the Berlin chess club having invited him to play simultaneously against twenty of the club's best players. Much fame preceded him: he had already earned many medals for chess, in which he had regularly engaged since his fifth year.

His powers were convincingly demonstrated in Berlin on this occasion, with Reshevsky winning ten, drawing nine, and losing only one of the games, a result which surpassed even the most sanguine expectations of the club's members.

About that time much publicity was being given to tests on specially gifted children in a number of Berlin schools, and I was induced to find out how this young prodigy would react to a scientific examination. Permission to test him was granted by his father, though not without reluctance.

In my efforts to create a contact with the boy, I found that the only effective aid to closer acquaintanceship was a stop-watch; chocolate, toys and similar enticements failed completely. The mechanism of the stop-watch delighted him, and when I introduced the other apparatus for the tests, he was so interested that I could proceed at once with the examination.

This included a number of tests devised in accordance with the well-known Binet-Simon method, and here the results were not at all satisfactory. The description of pictures, one of the most important tests, was quite inadequate. The boy had never seen a picture book in his life. He had, up till then, had no schooling, and it became apparent that he possessed only a limited knowledge of many things familiar to most children.

He failed to recognize a lion, a monkey, a tiger, or a camel. A fox or wolf he called a dog. A bat he called a bird. The only bird to whom he could give a specific name was a canary. He did not even know a stork, which was a very familiar idea in the nursery, at any rate, at that time, and in Central Europe. Shown a picture of a mushroom, he said "chocolate!", presumably on account of the color. To a picture of a cabbage he said "tree."

He had never, so far, tried to draw, and was unable to copy even the simplest geometrical forms correctly. Moreover, though he knew that the day was a Wednesday, he had not the slightest idea of the day, month, or day of the month. He did not know the names for the elementary colors red, yellow, blue. In arithmetic, he was below standard for his age. He did not know the number "0", and when I told him about it, he took pleasure in repeating "noughtnoughtnought." One had to assume that these insufficiencies were due solely to lack of training.

The picture was entirely different when the child was given tests connected with an activity familiar to him, namely, chess. I tested his spatial visualization by asking him to combine a number of irregular forms, so as to form one regular one, or to find how, by means of a single cut, irregular forms could be divided in such a way as to permit the setting up of one single one. Out of seven such problems devised for pupils of the elementary schools or for industrial apprentices aged thirteen to fourteen (nearly twice his age) he solved four correctly. The ones he could not solve were those which children of fourteen solve in nine cases out of ten, whereas he found the correct procedure to solve very difficult problems which, as a rule, were tackled satisfactorily by only half the candidates. One which he solved had proved unconquerable to all other children. A striking result!

It was in memory tests that the young Reshevsky showed the most extraordinary proficiency. He was allowed four minutes to examine forty figures, each drawn in a special square on a sheet of paper. The paper was then removed. He was able to restate the figures without a single mistake, and in the correct order. Moreover, he was able to fill in these numbers correctly on a blank sheet divided into squares. This was a much better result than experimental psychology had ever previously obtained throughout the whole range of observations on adults. When interrogated, he explained that, throughout the whole time of his quoting the figures, he had visualized them quite clearly.

It was not only his efficiency in solving the problems that stamped him as a child with extraordinary abilities in a given direction, but the way in which the tasks were tackled. He would not allow any kind of assistance in his endeavors. When I asked him what he would do if the curtains in the room were suddenly to catch fire, he replied, "Get a bucket of water and throw it on the flame!" "But why not call the fire brigade?" "I want to see to it myself."

This desire to overcome difficulties is definitely characteristic of unusually gifted children, as a large number of psychological investigations have proved. Children of this type, far from being failures in later life, rise up to expectations.

At that time, Reshevsky was living in straightened circumstances. His work as a chess prodigy provided for his subsistence, but this strenuous and occasionally very hectic activity entailed a serious risk to his not too strong constitution. Having got to know him through the examination, I was convinced that here was a most deserving case, and I endeavored to find some wealthy patron who would take the boy under his wing. I failed. I was told there were so many cases in which a child prodigy had proved to have, as Franz Liszt put, "his future in the past." Intelligence tests were still regarded with skepticism. It was all the more gratifying when, with the passing of years, it became obvious that the tests conducted on methods so very primitive as compared with those of today had after all given a correct diagnosis.

LEARNING TO GRIN AND BEAR IT

Good players know when to give up. When faced with impending material loss without any reasonable compensation for it, the modern master ordinarily does not waste his time carrying on a lost cause against a competent adversary.

Recently, expert Borel Menas, former coach of the Rumanian women's chess team, engaged the services of USCF master Jeremy Silman for a training match intended to prepare Menas for an upcoming tournament. The games were contested in the pleasant surroundings of the Serramonte Public Library in Daly City, and, although Silman won the match, Menas purchased a little piece of immortality with scintillating six-mover.

Silman's reaction to his opponent's final move was an initial period of careful calculation and then, as the full impact of its force swept over him, unrestrained laughter and congratulations on a fine miniature.

White: Jeremy Silman (2228). Black: Borel Menas (2147). Training Game, Daly City, Feb. 12, 1977. Irregular Queen's Gambit Declined 1 d4 d5 2 c4 Bf5 3 Nc3 e6 4 cd ed 5 Qb3 Nc6 6 Nd5 Be4 Resigns!