

The Wizard of Warsaw
A Chess Biography of Szymon Winawer

Tomasz Lissowski and Grigory Bogdanovich

The Wizard of Warsaw: A Chess Biography of Szymon Winawer

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Game	White	Black	Opening	Year
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Chapter 1

Winawers in Warsaw

A new subject of Czar of all Russia Nicholas I was born on 6th March 1838. The wife of Abraham Winawer, one of Warsaw's leading Misnagdim Jews¹, gave birth to a son who was named Szymon. Abraham's house was full of children's voices for many years; Szymon had a great many siblings: nine brothers and five sisters. Determining the full extent of the family tree² is no easy task, since there was another Winawer family in Warsaw in the early 19th century.

It's impossible to determine where Abraham's great-grandfathers lived, what they did and how many children they had, because the Jews living in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, just like peasants and poor folk from the cities, had no surnames, and there were no official birth and death registry offices in the countryside.

The situation changed after the Third Partition of Poland (1795), when Warsaw and all territories to the north and west of the Pilica, Vistula and Bug rivers were allocated to Prussia. On 17th April 1797, the Prussian king issued a decree (the General Judenreglement) which among much else ordered all Jews "to add a surname of their own choice to their given names". That's when the surname Winawer was first recorded by the German officials who came to Southern Prussia. Jewish surnames were often derived from their birthplaces, and almost all Jews who lived in Warsaw came either from the countryside or from abroad. That's how surnames such as Posner ("of Posen" or "of Poznan") or Danziger ("of Danzig" or "of Gdansk") came about. The Winawers thought that their family name was derived from Wieniawa, a former suburb of Lublin which is now a part of the city center. Lublin hosted one of Poland's oldest Jewish communities³.

¹ The milieu of Polish Jews comprised several religious groups who had little love towards each other. The followers of Israel (the alias of Baal Shem Tov) of Miedzyboz (1698–1795), or Hasids, prevailed among the poorer folks. The Misnagdim, who adhered to traditional laws, were less numerous. There were other groups, too.

² The family tree, created for this book by Warsaw engineer Krzysztof Tom, is on the previous page. We have used spelling consistent with that in the book *The Winawer Saga* (see note 4) where needed.

³ Lublin hosted one of the oldest and most important Jewish communities in the Polish lands (traces of 11th century settlements have been found); famous religious schools (yeshivas) functioned there, and the Jewish "Council of Four Lands" (Waad Arba Aratsot) assembled there.



Map of the Polish lands after the 1815 Congress of Vienna. The light-shaded area in the middle is the Kingdom of Poland (Congress Poland). To its immediate west is the Grand Duchy of Posen, shaded dark.

would soon enter, not always with peaceful intentions. After Prussian rule, the Duchy of Warsaw was established for several years. It was subsequently attacked by the Austrians, then Napoleon's Grande Armée entered the city. The latter then fled from the frigid expanses of Russia, chased off by the Czar's armies. The 1815 Congress of Vienna partitioned the Duchy between the states of the Three Black Eagles (the empires of Austria, Russia and Prussia), which existed, with minor changes, for the next 100 years. The status and the rights of Warsaw Jews constantly changed as well: new rulers would abolish old provisions and establish new ones. The description of all changes and historical collisions is beyond the modest scope of this book, so we will limit ourselves to stating that the population of the Warsaw Jews steadily increased together with the quickly-growing city, and the large Winawer family became one of the most prominent ones in their milieu.

Israel Jakob Winawer (we don't know if he lived in Warsaw proper or in the old suburb of Praga (which had borne that name for centuries) on the right bank of the Vistula, where there were no limitations on Jewish settlements) had a son named Mordechai (he was possibly not the only son); the only things known about him are that he was a vodka manufacturer and rented out seven tenement houses.

The first person known to have the surname was Israel Jakob Winawer. He ran an import business, selling wine and other alcohol drinks, and, after amassing significant assets, obtained the status of "Schutzjude" ("protected Jew"), which prevented him from being ousted in case the city officials decided that there were too many followers of Judaism in the city.

The history of Warsaw in the next 20 years was full of dramatic events; one army would leave the city, and another

Mordekhai was well-respected for his extensive Jewish learning and for his patronage of many Jewish writers and literary figures who visited Warsaw and whose books he helped to publish.

<...> Known for his orthodoxy, Mordekhai was a leader of the Warsaw Misnagdim. When he died in 1835, he was the first Winawer to be buried in Warsaw, not in Praga, Grodzisk or Sochaczew. In addition to his property he left a fortune of 133,633 rubles, a considerable sum at that period⁴.

One of Mordekhai's sons, Abraham Winawer, continued the profitable work of his father. Deep pockets and the status of his father and grandfather helped him earn the post of Synagogue Chairman. To avoid any accidents, however, Abraham, the leader of the Misnagdim, entered into a tactical alliance with the Hasidic leaders; this move countered the influential enemies of the Chairman, the Maskilim, who were supporters of assimilation.

In 1832, Abraham purchased the building of a former venereological hospital on Mostowa Street, and the basement of this notorious building became a storage facility for mead. This episode was later commemorated in the literary works of poet Julian Tuwim.

In 1836 Abraham sought permission to live in Warsaw, a request which was immediately granted, despite the fact that he was a Misnaged and did not wear European clothes. But it was stipulated that he should not have in his house any other Jews who were not direct members of his family⁵.

The above quote leads to an unexpected conclusion: Abraham, despite his wealth and influence in the Jewish community, didn't have a Warsaw home until 1836. Soon afterwards, his son Szymon was born, who was destined for international fame.

We finish our description of Abraham Winawer's life here. He had a lot of children and worked hard to provide them with their own houses. The 1852 *House Registry of Warsaw and Praga* lists six houses owned by him: two on Twarda Street, two in the district of Mariensztat, one on Franciszkanska Street, and the aforementioned one on Mostowa Street. In private, Abraham could be quite a humorous man. Introducing his

⁴ Herman Marjan Winawer, *The Winawer Saga*, London 1994, p. 12. This book is the main source of information on the Winawer tribe, which has been scattered throughout the world. It provided invaluable assistance in compiling the current chapter

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

numerous children to guests, he would say, “This is the oldest one, and this is the dumbest one.”⁶ History did not record which of the children earned the moniker of “dumbest”.

Not much is known about Szymon’s childhood and youth. His mother seemed to dislike chess, thinking that it “stole time”. The game was strictly forbidden in his home. A contemporary journalist wrote of his education:

He was homeschooled at first, and after the Main School⁷ opened, he enrolled in the law department and studied there for three years⁸.

The first part of this report is probably true. In the 1840s and 1850s, only a handful of Jewish youths in Poland went to a grammar school (a “gimnazjum”, but they weren’t numerous: there were only two of them in the whole of Warsaw for quite a while). The reason for this was the requirement to wear a uniform.

A Jewish kid wearing a grammar school uniform was an obvious giveaway: it said to fellow Jews that his family had abandoned the traditions and that their ties with the ancestral faith had weakened so much that they were allowing their son to carry books and write during classes on Shabbat. Very few were prepared to face such accusations⁹.

It’s hard to imagine the children of Abraham Winawer, one of the leaders of the Misnagdim (defenders of the tradition!), walking the Warsaw streets in green uniforms with a red collar. This would have surely given their father a reputation of a heathen. There was another thing: in 1845, the authorities issued a secret decree to admit only children of *szlachta* families (Polish nobles) to grammar school. The Jewish children started to enroll more in private Realschules, but this only happened after the turning point in 1862.

The second part of the report, however, is not exactly correct. No documents have been ever found to prove that Winawer was indeed a student

⁶ Kazimierz Wroczynski, *Pol wieku wspomnien teatralnych* (Warsaw 1957), p. 229.

⁷ The Warsaw Main School (“Szkola Glowna”) was the higher education establishment that functioned in 1862–69, with four departments (law, medical, physics/mathematics and historical/philological). Alumni of this school included, among others, important writers of Polish literature Boleslaw Prus and Henryk Sienkiewicz, Nobel laureate in 1905.

⁸ Rafal Lipski, *Sport*, No. 13, 1900 (April), p. 5.

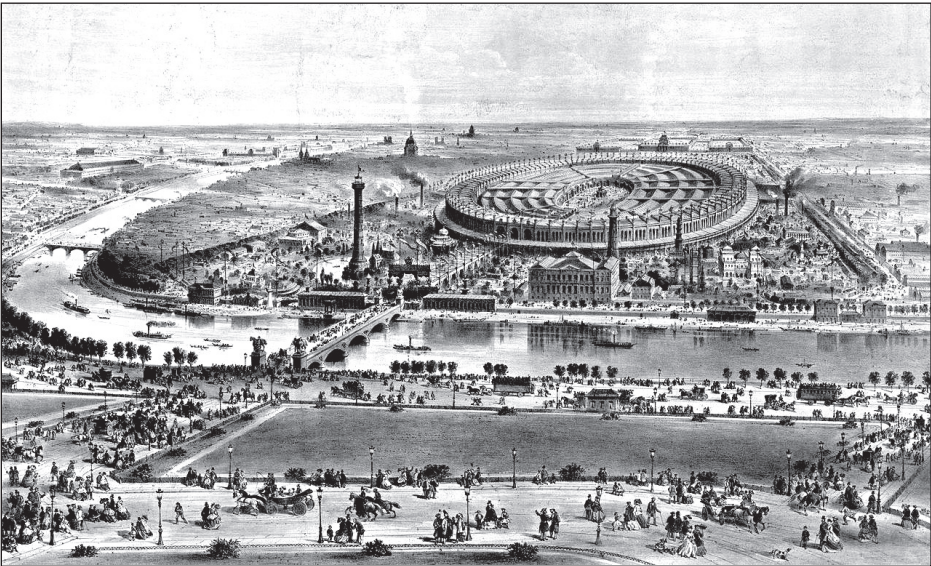
⁹ Adolf Jakub Cohn, *Z dziejow gminy starozakonnych w Warszawie*, 1907, p. 87.

Chapter 3

Sensation on the Champ De Mars

Paris, 4th June – 11th July 1867

Winawer's first international outing quickly became legendary. An amateur who had never achieved a single game published by a chess magazine, let alone in a newspaper, a Warsaw merchant who had gone to Paris "on business", and who had by chance signed up for a tournament with several players from the world elite (100-percent professionals who earned their living from chess). And this amateur takes second place, fighting for first place against the famous maestro Ignaz von Kolisch of Austria-Hungary until the very last round. That's how the press described Winawer's appearance at the Paris 1867 tournament, and this legend quickly spread to chess literature.

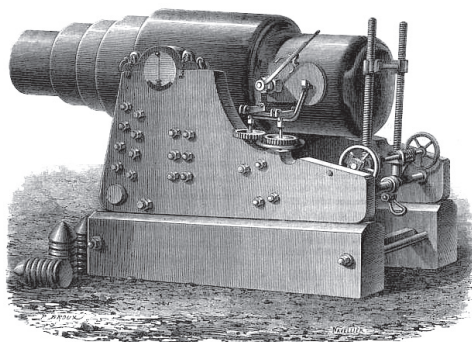


World Fair 1867, seen from the Trocadero Hill.

The Paris tournament was just one of several dozen events accompanying the World Fair (Exposition universelle de Paris 1867), which was held from 1st April to 3rd November at Champ de Mars²⁸, under the slogan "History of Work".

²⁸ Today, Champ de Mars is a park stretching from the Eiffel Tower in the direction of the Ecole Militaire; at first it was a place for army drills, and later it hosted the 1867, 1878 and 1900 World Fairs.

52,000 entrepreneurs from 42 countries presented their wares over an area of 700,000 square meters. The colossal cannon built at the Krupp factory in Essen, the biggest private enterprise in Europe at the time, with 10,000 workers employed, attracted the most attention.



Krupp's colossal cannon

Even though there was no independent state of Poland, Polish artists took part in the exhibition: Jozef Simmler, Artur Grottger, Josef Brandt, Juliusz Kossak, Wojciech Gerson, and Jan Matejko; the latter's huge painting *Rejtan*, displayed in the Austrian pavilion, won a gold medal.

Chess books provide several versions of pre-tournament events and conversations in which Winawer participated. He did, of course, visit the famed "chess sanctuary" Cafe de la Regence, where he met Samuel Rosenthal, his fellow countryman from Suwalki, who had earlier moved to France and earned his living from chess.

"I stood beside them," Leopold Hoffer wrote in his chess magazine²⁹, "and I clearly remember the following dialogue:

Rosenthal: 'So you are a chess player?'

Winawer: 'Why not?'

Rosenthal: 'Do you know what first-class chess means?'

Winawer: 'I can play chess, that is all I know.'

Rosenthal: 'Have you ever heard the name of Morphy?'

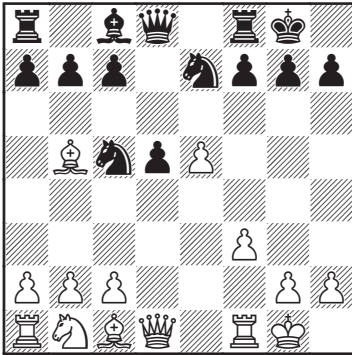
Winawer: 'Morphy? Yes! I believe he is also a chess player.'

Rosenthal (smiling): 'Do you know that Morphy is *the* first player living, and that he will beat everybody?'

²⁹ *The Chess-Monthly* 1893, No. 2, p. 162. There are also other versions of this dialogue, including that reported in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* (01.04.1893). Budapest-born Leopold Hoffer (1842–1913), who described the meeting of Rosenthal and Winawer with so many literary details, lived in Paris at the time and was the deputy tournament director (other sources say that he was the tournament secretary). In 1870 he moved to London and eventually became an influential chess journalist, publisher, arbiter and organizer.

No. 63. Ruy Lopez
Zukertort – Winawer
Vienna 1882

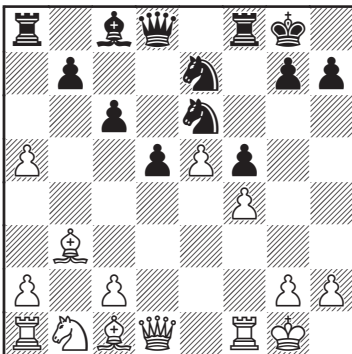
1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6
4.d4 exd4 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.e5 ♘e4
7.♗xd4 0-0 8.♗f5 d5 9.♗xe7+
♗xe7 10.f3 ♘c5



11.b4

An example from modern top-level practice: 11.♖e1 c6 12.♙f1 ♘g6 13.♙e3 ♗e6 14.♙f2 ♖e8 15.♗c3 ♗g5 16.♗c1 ♗xc1 17.♖axc1 with roughly equal chances (Gashimov – Eljanov, Elista 2008)

11...♗e6 12.f4 f5 13.♙a4 c6
14.♙b3 a5 15.bxa5



15...♖xa5

Two years before that game, Chigorin interpreted this position in a more “dynamic” way, but his opponent methodically picked apart black’s positional flaws and won: 15...♗xa5 16.♙e3 ♗c5 17.♗d2 b6 18.c4 ♙e6 19.cxd5 cxd5 (19...♙xd5!?) 20.♗f3 (Zukertort – Chigorin, Berlin 1881).

Winawer plays precise positional chess and, his inaccuracy on the 29th move notwithstanding, wins confidently. By the way, the “all-seeing commentators” liked to say that Winawer paid little attention to chess theory. What would they say about this game? Winawer repeats 14 moves from Chigorin’s game against the same opponent, Zukertort, and then improves upon black’s play. If that’s not home preparation, what is?

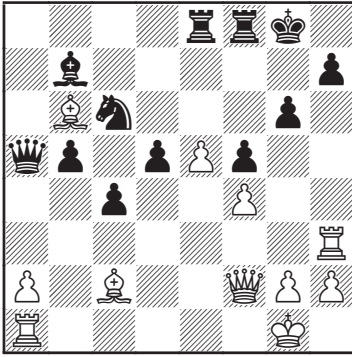
16.♙d2 ♖a8 17.♙e3 c5 18.c3 b5
19.♗d2 c4 20.♙c2 ♗a5

Perhaps the central break 20...d4!? was stronger, but Winawer plays like a true positional player – instead of helping his opponent eliminate the weak pawn on c3, he attacks it.

21.♖f3 ♙b7

Winawer doesn’t go for a good line, 21...♗xc3!? 22.♙c5 ♗a5 23.♖a3 ♗c7 24.♖xa8 ♗xc5+, with the subsequent 25...♗c7. It’s possible that he just hadn’t seen this unobvious move. The game move is second-rate, but nonetheless a solid positional move.

22.♖h3 g6 23.♗f3 ♗xc3 24.♗d4
♗xd4 25.♙xd4 ♗a5 26.♗e2 ♖ae8
27.♗f2 ♘c6 28.♙b6



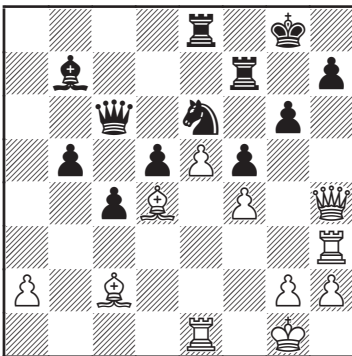
28...♖a6?!

The correct move was 28...♖a8!?, so as to avoid losing the exchange on the next move. Such flaws in Winawer's play show some tactical carelessness.

29.♙c5 ♖f7?

A mistake – black should have sacrificed an exchange to get the queen away from danger. Now Zukertort could have gained a decisive advantage with 30.♖a3!, but he missed this unexpected opportunity to decide the game immediately.

30.♖h4? ♘d8 31.♖e1 ♗c6
32.♙d4 ♘e6



Black has an obvious advantage: an extra pawn, a better center, a

great blockading knight, and white's kingside attack has already fizzled out.

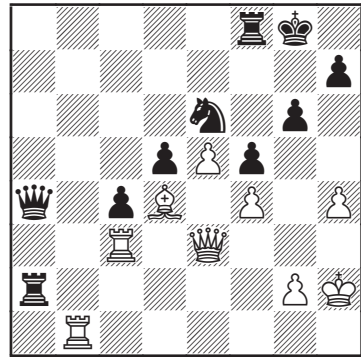
33.♗f2 b4 34.♖b1 ♖a8 35.♖xb4
♖xa2 36.♖c3

If 36.♖b6, then 36...♗xb6!
37.♙xb6 ♖a1+, and the passed c- and d-pawns will quickly decide the game.

36...♙a6 37.♖b8+ ♖f8 38.♖b1
♙b5 39.♗e3 ♗d7!?

Precise positional play by Winawer. The immediate 39...♙a4 can be met with 40.♖b6. It doesn't spoil the win entirely, but why the extra hassle?

40.h4 ♙a4 41.♙xa4 ♗xa4
42.♙h2?



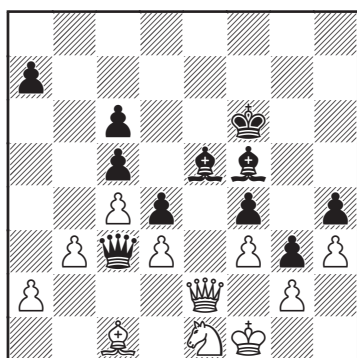
A mistake in a difficult position. "One bad move is often followed by other bad moves." (*Tarrasch*)

42...♖xg2+! 43.♙xg2 ♗a2+
44.♙g3 ♗xb1 45.♖c1 ♗e4 46.♖d1
♖b8 47.♗xe4 fxe4 (0-1)

The next game is purely positional, without any spectacular tactics. Winawer outplayed one of the strongest players of the time.

And that's how the "father" of positional theory was brought down. In the next game, the aforementioned opening structure brought Winawer unexpected success against Steinitz himself.

No. 68
Winawer – Steinitz
Paris 1867

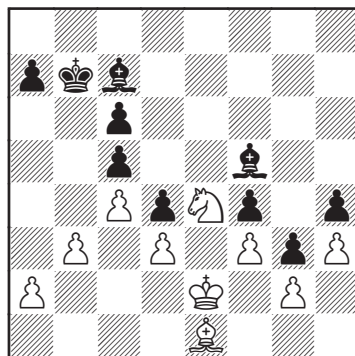


Winawer was defending for the whole game. Steinitz gained a huge space advantage and, unsurprisingly, was playing for a win. However, he carelessly sent his queen deep into the opponent's camp...

43. ♖d2 ♔b2 44. ♖a5 ♔xe2+
45. ♔xe2 ♕e7

In the opening, Winawer gave up his light-squared bishop for the c6 knight and disrupted Steinitz's pawn structure, doubling his c-pawns. And now, at the end of the game, this flaw becomes the reason for black's defeat. Winawer finds a clear path to win. The white knight adopts an attacking position, targeting the c5 square.

46. ♞c2 ♔d7 47. ♞a3 ♖d6
48. ♞b1 ♖c7 49. ♖e1 ♔c8 50. ♞d2
♔b7 51. ♞e4!



Alas, black can't trade on e4: after fxe4, the white king breaks through to the black camp through the vacated f3 square.

51... ♔b6

And now the white bishop gets moving. It goes to a3, rendering the c5 pawn indefensible.

52. ♖d2 a5

Black's dark-squared bishop cannot be involved in the c5 pawn's defense because it's forced to defend the f4 pawn.

53. ♖c1 a4 54. ♖a3 axb3
55. ♖xc5+ ♔a5 56. axb3 ♖e5
57. ♞d2

And now the knight goes to c2, for the second attack on the d4 pawn.

57... ♖h7 58. ♞b1 ♖f5 59. ♞a3
♖d7 60. ♞c2, and after losing the second pawn the game is over – Steinitz resigned after a few more moves.