

Chess in Catania and province in late 19th century

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Writing about Chess in Catania, worthy of mention is the priest Don **Pietro Carrera** (Militello of Valley of Noto, 12.07.1573-Messine, 18.09.1647). A judgment on **Carrera** as chess player is still uncertain. In 1598 he was beaten by **Salvatore Albino** (called «the Beneventan»), but after few days won again and again against him. **Carrera** played and won many chess players as Don **Blasco Isfar** (Baron of Siculiana), **Girolamo Cascio**. In 1611 he returned his native Militello and, attracted by historical studies and poetry, abandoned competitive chess. In 1618 he was beaten by Don **Mariano Marano**, but he couldn't get the satisfaction of revenge.

The chess books of **Carrera** constitute true bibliographic rarities. The *Pessopedia*, a short manuscript poem in latin exameters, now lost, described a chess game.

Il gioco de gli scacchi («The Game of Chess») was an important treatise, subdivided in eight books (Militello, 1617), where «learning the rules, the odds, the endgames, the blindfold chess and a discussion about the true origins of chess in itself».

Three copies are preserved in Biblioteche riunite «Civica e A. Ursino-Recupero» of Catania (Preg E 112; Preg E 122; Preg E 134), one copy in the Regional University Library of Catania (Armadio rari 158), another in Zelantea of Acireale (C 46. 1. 9. ex II 39.6.4)

In 1635 **Carrera**, under a pseudonym, published in Catania the *Risposta di Valentino Vespaio contra l'apologia di Alessandro Salvio* («Valentino Vespaio's answer against Alessandro Salvio's explanation»), where he debated the

accusations and criticisms made against him from **Alessandro Salvio**.

Three copies are preserved in Biblioteche riunite «Civica e A. Ursino-Recupero» of Catania (Preg E 1712; 1.42.297; tip. Cat. 600 D. 14) and as many in the Regional University Library of Catania (Preg. I. F. 9/2; 4.19.146/31; 4.13.92.2).

After **Carrera** a great gap of documentation exists from the second half of 17th century to the the first half of 19th century: a chess activity in Catania is attested only from 1877.

In 1877 two Catanian solvers of chess problems published in *L'Illustrazione Italiana* were **C. Corbolani** and **G. Staurenghi**.

In the same year **G. Valentini** composed some chess problems.

In 1879 **Antonino Sciuti** published, in Catania, a book titled: "Elementary rules of Chess play and proposals of reform by Antonino Sciuti" (*Regole elementari sul giuoco degli scacchi e proposte di riforma per Antonino Sciuti*).

Printed in the cultural climate of Positivism, was at the centre of attention the question about Chess rules, a subject largely discussed in Italy in the Second Congress of Livorno (1878).

The crux of the matter was developed in the third chapter: **Sciuti** underlined the importance of adding a pecuniary interest to Chess play.

Antonino Sciuti, perhaps was a teacher; he lived in Catania, when printed the book.

"Elementary rules of Chess play and proposals of reform by Antonino Sciuti", work which was discovered in the 1997 by **Santo Daniele Spina**, is a true bibliographic rarity: at present only one copy is known to exist in Italy and it belonged to the private library of **Gaetano Nicolosi**, Sicilian chess player.

Also worthy of mention are two photos of the baron **Franco Auteri** (Catania, 10.8.1851 - Naples, 5.3.1914), a rich producer and dealer of silk.

The first photo (about 1884), represents the baron with the child Angelina; on the the second (about 1890) the baron plays

chess against himself.

In 1892 **I. Cönthal**, Catanian correspondent, contributed to the *La Nuova Rivista degli Scacchi*.

In the two-year period between 1894 and 1895, in Catania and in the Etnean towns, many chess players were solvers of chess problems published in the *Giornale di Sicilia*. The editor of the chess column was the colonel **Achille Campo** of Palermo.

The Catanian solvers were: **Pietro Aellig**, **Angelo Ardizzone**, **Francesco Ventri Nigrelli**, **Baldassarre Cafilisch**, **Th. Rietmann**, **Antonio Zeno** e **A. Leone**. In the neighbouring towns enjoyed to solve some chess problems the following chess players: **S. Giuffré** of Riposto, **Ignazio Zappalà** of S. Giovanni la Punta, **Stefano Reitano** of Pedara.

Only at the end of 1895 the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese» was founded from **Giuseppe Alessi**, **Giuseppe Cantelli**, **Angelo Ardizzone** and **Gaetano Nicolosi**. Furthermore the teacher **Giovanni Battista Valle** of La Spezia and the lawyer **Carlo Salvioli** of Venice were elected honorary members of the «Catanian Chess Club».

The club, under the presidency of the lawyer **Giuseppe Alessi**, promoted the first tournament with prizes from February until April 1896: the victory was for **Domenico Wrzy**.

Then the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese» organized his «1° International Chess Composing Tournament»: the winner was E. Pradignat (France), 2nd A. Reggio (Italy), 3rd J. Jespersen (Danimark). On the 1 January 1898, the first Italian Chess Federation, the *Unione Scacchistica Italiana*, was formed by the clubs of Catania, Palermo, Rome, Genoa, Livorno, Naples, La Spezia, Turin, Treviso.

The lawyer **Giuseppe Alessi** was born in Catania, on May 15, 1867. President of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese» from 1896 to 1899, he wrote a chess column in the *Corriere di Catania* (from May 1896 until October 1897) and for *La Sicilia*

Letteraria (from November 1897). Infatigable promoter, formed in Giarre a chess club, section of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese». In the two-year period between 1899 and 1900 **Alessi** contributed to the *Eco degli Scacchi*.

A match was played around the end of 19th century between **Giuseppe Alessi** and **Cosimo Sgroi**. The games of the match, which have been published in 2001, were preserved in a privately owned manuscript scrapbook (propriety of dr. **Giuseppe Guarnera**). The match ended in a clear victory for Sgroi (+ 8, = 4, - 4).

Between 1930 and 1934 was member of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese», chess section of the Circolo Artistico in Santa Nicoletta Square.

The lawyer **Giuseppe Alessi** learned chess from his father, Salvatore (Catania 1846-Catania 15.10.1915) who, as handed down in family lore, played correspondence chess with an opponent (the duke Alexander Nelson Bridport or Alexander Nelson Hood?) living in the Nelson Dukedom, at 13 km from Bronte, in a singular manner matter: he sent and received messages, on thin light paper with moves in notation, rolled up and put into a small quills, through carrier pigeons located in a floor of his Tower. Named after its owner **Salvatore Alessi**, the tower was designed (in 1886) and built by engineer Carlo Sada. The building, as panoramic tower, was inaugurated and opened to public, for a ticket fee per person, on May 1, 1888. The bizarre construction, whose principal function was to irrigate the «Alessi Garden» below, was demolished at May 1963 to make way for a residential development.

The Alessi Tower gave **Vitaliano Brancati**, famous Italian writer, the inspiration for his first youth novel, *Gli anni perduti* (Catania 1936).

Francesco Torresi Reina (Catania, 20.1.1868 - Catania, 30.10.1950), passionate chess player, in 1896 he took 2nd place in the first tournament with prizes organized by the «Catanian Chess Club». In 1922 he was member of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese», chess section of the Gabinetto di

Lettura in Etnea Street.

Lawyer, staunch supporter of monarchy, was a remarkable swordsman and fought at least nineteen duels in his lifetime.

Vincenzo Bertone Gemmellaro (Catania, 27.11.1877-Treccate, 07.2.1943). In 1896 member of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese» and university student in law, he was also a correspondence chess player. Lawyer by profession, staunch supporter of monarchy, in 1922 was elected president of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese», chess section of the Gabinetto di Lettura in Etnea Street.

In 1930 **Bertone** moved to Milan, where he opened a law firm with **De Vecchi**. During the Second World War he died from pneumonia in Treccate (Novara) .

The baron **Adamo Asmundo** di Gisira (Catania, 01.01.1875-Catania, 20.05.1952) in 1896, when he was an university student in law, participated in a correspondence tournament organized by the «Associazione Scacchistica Fanese». President of the «Circolo Scacchistico Catanese» in 1933, on April 12, 1933 he participated in a simultaneous exhibition given by grandmaster **Efim Bogoljubov** in the Circolo Artistico. Doctor in law, rich landowner, he wrote some plays and in 1913 published the novel *Eredi Pianella* (Pianella Heirs), now preserved in the **Giovanni Verga's** House Museum.

Peter Aellig (Boltigen BE, 15.04.1841 - Zurigo, 27.09.1911), founding member and president (1900) of the «Deutschschweizer Klub» in Catania, since 1894 he was a passionate solver of chess problems published in *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, *il Corriere di Catania* and *L'Eco degli Scacchi*, of which was a collaborator in the two-year period between 1899 and 1900. Swiss businessman, in Sicily he was co-owner of the «Rietmann & Aellig», an import-export firm.

Also the Swiss **Baldassarre Cafilisch** (Trin, 21.08.1849-Catania il 20.11.1908) was a solver of chess problems published in *Il Giornale di Sicilia*. In 1874 he moved to Catania, where

with his brother founded in 1876 «Fratelli Caflisch», an import-export firm.

Vincenzo Finocchiaro (Catania, 06.12.1871-Catania, 08.08.1929) in December 1896 participated in the second tournament with prizes organized by the «Catanian Chess Club». He was an important local historian whose interests included the Sicilian and Catanian Risorgimento.

Gaetano Nicolosi (Linguaglossa, 21.07.1871 - Linguaglossa, 27.10.1945). Founding member of the «Catanian Chess Club», in late 19th Century he was the best chess player in the city. In the 1900 in Rome participated in the first tournament of the «Italian Chess Federation» (the Unione Scacchistica Italiana): he drew with Arturo Reggio, the winner of the tournament, Italian champion in same year.

In 1916, in Rome, he lost against B. Soldatenkoff, a Russian Master (+1 =1 - 2).

Nicolosi also participated in a correspondence tournaments organized by the «Associazione Scacchistica Fanese» and by «Italian Chess Federation» (1904-1905). He was winner against **E. T. Marshal** in the correspondence match between «L'Italia Scacchistica» and the «Kent Country Chess Association». **Nicolosi's** private library, very precious, was purchased by the «Regional University Library» of Catania.

Vespasiano Bettoni (Venice, 01.01.1863 - Catania, 18.04.1938). Chess player, native of Venice, in 1896 he took 4th place in the first tournament with prizes organized by the «Catanian Chess Club». He also participated in a correspondence tournament of the «Associazione Scacchistica Fanese». Member of the «Italian Chess Federation» (the Unione Scacchistica Italiana), from 1894 until 1899 he composed chess problems in two, three, four moves.

He embarked on military career and was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel in the Marine Corps. **Bettoni** published some books: *Sprizzi-Sprazzi-Spruzzi* (Mestre, 1888) on philosophical subject; *Il settimo sacramento* (The Seventh

Sacrament, Siracuse, 1907) on the matrimony; *Fumi e Profumi* (Fumes and Perfumes, Siracuse, 1908), a collection of poems dedicated to his sons Alfredo, died young, and Elvira.

He wrote an unpublished encyclopedic work: *Archivio di cultura universale a sintesi esplosiva* (Archives of Universal Knowledge in synthesis explosive). The 29 manuscript volumes dealt with 153 subjects. In the eleventh volume **Bettoni** treated chess.

Angelo Ardizzone, born in Catania on March 14, 1855, was co-owner of the «Fratelli Ardizzone», an import firm (Représentations, Commissions, Recouvrementes pour toute la Sicilie / Rappresentanze, Commissioni, Incassi per la Sicilia) which operated on a regional market, by using foreign providers. **Ardizzone**, as handed down in family lore, had a singular passion for exotic birds and parrots.

At the end of 1895 he was founding member of the «Catanian Chess Club» of which was secretary until 1898. He also participated in a correspondence tournament of the «Associazione Scacchistica Fanese». From 1896 until 1897 he composed chess problems in two, three, four moves and was awarded an posthumous honorable mention at composing tourney of *Le Serate Familiari*.

Ardizzone was life and soul of the «Catanian Chess Club», but he died young at the age of forty-four, leaving his second wife and two daughters: on June 5, 1899, after returning from London, in Genoa he was struck down by a heart attack.

His death was a great loss to local chess activity: the two chess columns in the *Sancio Panza e La Tarantola*, of which he was editor under the anagrammatic pseudonym «Galeno D'Azzoneri», also ended.

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