Maroczy Chess

In 1985, a chess game was arranged between Russian grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi and a deceased grandmaster, the Hungarian Geza Maroczy, making his moves via a medium who specialized in automatic writing. Korchnoi won after 47 moves. The game, played over the course of almost eight years, was publicized on German TV and in popular books and magazines. Given the complexity of alternative explanations, the case is widely considered to be convincing evidence for the survival of consciousness after death.

Setup and Method

At the suggestion of a friend, the Swiss asset manager and amateur chess player Wolfgang Eisenbeiss undertook to arrange a chess game between living and dead grandmasters in 1985. He was able to persuade the Russian grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi (1931-2016) to participate (Korchnoi, who lived in Switzerland, was ranked third in the world at the time and had defected to the West in 1976). According to Korchnoi, Eisenbeiss asked him which deceased grandmaster, if it were possible, he would like to play. After some consideration, Korchnoi suggested the Cuban José Raúl Capablanca, the Estonian Paul Keres, or the Hungarian Geza Maroczy.1 Eisenbeiss turned to Robert Rollans, an automatic-writing medium he had known for three years, to locate one of these who would be willing to play a game with Korchnoi, conveying his moves mediumistically. Rollans was unfamiliar with chess and was not paid for his efforts.

In June, Rollans was able to report that a communicator claiming to have been the Hungarian grandmaster Geza Maroczy (1870-1951), who had ranked third worldwide in 1900, had agreed to the proposal (the other two could not be contacted). ‘Maroczy’ gave his reasons:

> First because I also want to do something to aid mankind living on earth to become convinced that death does not end everything, but instead the mind is separated from the physical body and comes up to us into a new world, where individual life continues to manifest itself in a new unknown dimension. Second being a Hungarian patriot I want to guide the eyes of the world into the direction of my beloved Hungary a little bit.2

Through the medium’s hand, Maroczy sent the message ‘e4’, which is chess notation for advancing the white king’s pawn two squares. Rollans forwarded the move to Eisenbeiss who sent it to Korchnoi. Korchnoi’s countermove, ‘e6’ was relayed back. Rollans set up a portable chessboard and communicated the move to Maroczy in his usual way. Rollans and Korchnoi had no direct contact with each other until September 1992, near the end of the game, when they met on camera for a TV show.

Play continued for seven years and eight months, ending when Maroczy resigned on February 11, 1993. The length of time between moves varied depending on Korchnoi's schedule and illnesses suffered by Rollans, who died about three weeks following the game's completion. When Korchnoi made a move, Rollans typically waited ten days to receive Maroczy's move. A tickle in his body would signal that he should sit down to write the incoming message.

The Game

The full game was as follows:[3]


Korchnoi vs Maroczy table of chess moves

For an interactive online version, visit here.

Maroczy gave detailed analyses of his moves, but Rollans – whom Eisenbeiss had to teach the moves and notation system – was unable to retain the information. Korchnoi commented, at move 27, 'During the opening phase Maroczy showed weaknesses. His play is old-fashioned. But I must confess that my last moves have not been too convincing. 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'.[4]

In 2007, neuropsychiatrist and amateur chess expert Vernon Neppe carried out a detailed computer analysis to determine whether either the game or Maroczy's playing style could have been simulated on a computer, using software to score the two players' moves.[5] Neppe notes that Maroczy had been known as a strong end-game player, and that chess techniques improved over the course of the twentieth century so that Maroczy would likely play only at master level by 1980s standards (Maroczy himself communicated that he was rusty for lack of practice, and the mode of play made it more difficult).

Neppe summarizes as follows:

> *Maroczy* played at least at the Master level, and very debatably and less likely, at a rusty, lowish grandmaster level. This level could not have been achieved by the medium even after great training, assuming the medium was not a chess genius. The difference in the game may have related to opening theory developed in the 1950s after Maroczy had died. *Maroczy* was caught in a chess opening variation that had possibly been refuted after he died. Thereafter he played an excellent game and substantially better than the computer. (At this level, computers lose to strong humans mainly because they cannot think creatively). Korchnoi's play was at the level of an accomplished grandmaster.[6]

Factual Verifications

About a year into the game, Eisenbeiss decided to seek additional evidence that the communicator was indeed Geza Maroczy, and asked him via Rollans to communicate 'a report about his life with special emphasis on his chess-playing on earth'.[7] On July 31, 1986, Rollans recorded a 38-page text with details of Maroczy's

life, and a comment: 'I am astonished when somebody does not believe me to be here personally, because I know for sure that not all of us here are able to play chess'.8 The text was partly in Hungarian and partly in German that was clearly not from a native speaker.

To investigate the veracity of this material, Eisenbeiss drafted 91 questions on personal matters, chess playing and Maroczy's tournament wins, and asked historian and chess expert Laszlo Sebestyen to seek answers in historical records. Sebestyen visited the Budapest Chess Club's library, the Hungarian Parliament's library, and the Hungarian Scientific Academy, and interviewed Maroczy's two surviving children, both elderly, and a cousin, finding answers to almost all the questions. The verbal results are provided in table form in an appendix.9 A table10 in the text presents the numerical results:

Types of Result	Frequency	Percentage
Correct	80	87.9%
Semi-correct	1	1.1%
Incorrect	3	3.3%
Unsolved	7	7.7%

The questions were also ranked by degree of difficulty:

- general knowledge (what many people would know)
- encyclopedic knowledge (can be looked up in an ordinary encyclopedia)
- guessable, inferable
- expert knowledge, but easy to investigate (specialist books readily accessible in libraries containing the information)
- expert knowledge, but difficult to investigate (hidden sources)
- private knowledge (known by few persons only, not known to be written down)11

A second table shows that 90% of the questions fell into the three most difficult categories, and 22% in the most difficult of all (private knowledge). A third table shows that 94% of questions requiring hidden or private knowledge were correctly answered by 'Maroczy'.

Neppe recalculated these results and discovered errors which, when corrected, indicated an even higher degree of accuracy based on the table in Appendix 1: '79/81 correct, or 97.5%, for all the authenticated items, with only 2/88, or 2.3%, incorrect'.12

Several of the verifications were striking. For instance, when Eisenbeiss later questioned Maroczy to test his memory, he purposely sought out a chess match that Maroczy had played against an obscure player, and that contained a single surprising, pivotal move. This was Maroczy vs Romi, played in San Remo, Italy in 1930, in which Maroczy's position had seemed hopeless and defeat certain until he made an inspired move and went on to win.

Asked if the name ‘Romi’ meant anything to him, Maroczy replied:

> I am sorry to say that I never knew a chess-player named Romi. But I think you are wrong with the name. I had a friend in my youth, who defeated me when I was young, but he was called Romih—with an ‘h’ at the end. I then never again saw the friend whom I so admired. In 1930 at the tournament of San Remo—who is also present? My old friend Romih coming from Italy also participated in that tournament. And so it came about that I played against him one of the most thrilling matches I ever played. I suspect that you were thinking about the same person but gave the name incorrectly.

Research showed that the name was indeed sometimes spelled with an ‘h’ at the end, Romih, as it had been spelled in the tournament record. Delving deeper, Eisenbeiss learned that Romih was of Slav origin and emigrated to Italy in 1918; in the years following the tournament he dropped the ‘h’ because it was unfamiliar to Italians.

Another striking verification came about when Maroczy, asked a question to which he didn’t know the answer, provided information in an unrelated topic which proved to be more evidential. He was asked ‘Who was the Austrian founder of the Vera Menchik club?’ Vera Menchik was the first-ever female world chess champion, holding the championship from 1927 until her death in a bombing in 1944. The ‘Vera Menchik’ club was an informal collection of men whom she defeated, and the ‘Austrian founder’ was the first member and president, having lost to Menchik in 1929. The question was posed by a Swiss chess magazine in 1988 as a reader quiz.

In answer, Maroczy confessed he could not remember and speculated that it could be one of three men, one of whom (Dr Albert Becker) was correct, but whom he incorrectly dismissed. When the correct answer was published, Maroczy described another incident that happened at the same 1929 tournament, in Karlsbad, Germany. The world champion, Jose Raoul Capablanca of Havana, had taken up a Russian mistress who accompanied him at the tournament. Unexpectedly, his Cuban wife showed up, and the moment Capablanca saw her, Maroczy wrote, ‘his face turned white and then red. I was there.’[13] Discomfited, the champion blundered disastrously in his next move, leading to a loss to an inferior opponent. Maroczy’s account was found to match that of an author who claimed he might be the only one who knew the reason for Capablanca’s surprising error; the only discrepancy was the colour of the mistress’s hair. The story could be found in no other source.

For an analysis of all three chess games of import in the case—Maroczy vs Korchnoi, Maroczy vs Romi(h) and Capablanca vs Samisch—see Hornecker (2011).

In his 2007 analysis, Neppe considers that the accurate factual details produced mediumistically strongly reinforce the perception of genuine communication. To achieve the effect by fraud would have involved the collaboration of many people, including Eisenbeiss and Maroczy’s children. In his view, this complexity also militates against (non-survivalist) explanations in terms of ‘super-ESP’, in which such information is said to have been retrieved paranormally from the memories of living people rather than discarnates.[14]

For a video interview of Vernon Neppe from 2016, see here. Neppe notes that the great American grandmaster Bobby Fischer, who is the brother-in-law of parapsychologist Russell Targ, reviewed the Maroczy vs Korchnoi game and commented that anyone who could give that degree of fight to Viktor Korchnoi over that number of moves was probably playing at grandmaster level.

Criticisms

In a 2021 critique, May and Marwaha argue that insufficient account was taken of the role played by Rollans, who could have achieved his objective either by fraud or by precognition, or a by combination of both. They conclude that the case lacks the rigor expected of parapsychological laboratory studies, and therefore cannot be considered evidence of survival. 15

Skeptic writer and chess aficionado Pepijn van Erp critiqued the case in a 2017 blogpost. He challenges Neppe's evaluation of Maroczy's level of play by saying Neppe is 'not a very good chess player' and suggests that an amateur player such as Eisenbeiss could make the same moves, though he omits to mention the contrary view of other chess experts whom Neppe consulted.

Van Erp also claims the choice of opening is untypical of Maroczy, disagrees with Korchnoi that it is old-fashioned and suggests that Korchnoi purposely made poor moves to set up an interesting end game. He attributes the verifications of Maroczy's life details to fraud, noting correctly that the mediumship sessions and Eisenbeiss's work were conducted in absence of independent observers (a weakness Eisenbeiss admits in his case report). He further accuses Eisenbeiss of having acquired Maroczy's diaries prior to the game. He even seems to implicate Korchnoi. But although van Erp ascribes the case to fraud, he plays down the best evidence; for instance he omits the Capablanca incident and details known only to Maroczy's family.16

Heyme Breederveld takes issue with Neppe's claim that the success of the project cannot be attributed to super-ESP, the claim that information appearing to come from discarnate spirits could be acquired paranormally by living minds. According to Neppe, in Breederveld's words, this case 'would require the repeated and active cogitation of a master chess player or players while alive, extended over a prolonged period with 47 relevant responses (47 moves in the game) for this to be an explanation'.17 Breederveld notes that such a person did in fact exist: Victor Korchnoi.18

At least three objections have been raised to this criticism: it does not address the interview data; it requires that Rollans access Korchnoi's thoughts 'to an unheard-of degree'; and if Rollans knew what his opponent was thinking, he should surely have won the match.19

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. Korchnoi (2005).
- 2. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 70.
- 3. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 67.
- 4. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 67.
- 5. Neppe (2007).
- 6. Neppe (2007), 146.
- 7. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 68.
- 8. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 68.
- 9. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), Appendix 1, 83.
- 10. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 72.
- 11. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 72.
- 12. Neppe (2007), 145, detailed corrections in footnotes.
- 13. Eisenbeiss and Hassler (2006), 76.
- 14. Neppe (2007), 150-51.
- 15. May & Marwaha (2021).
- 16. Van Erp (2017).
- 17. Neppe (2007), 147.
- 18. Breederveld (2008).
- 19. Allen (2011), 5.