

# The Very Young and Very Old Often Chess Experts; Science Offers an Explanation for Child Champion



player, but he is no longer a champion.

"A chess champion is only a chess player, nothing else. He is not an executive or a statesman. On the other hand, exceptionally good business executives are often exceptionally good chess players, though not champions. The ability to play championship chess requires only a narrow plane of the mind's activities. It does not demand a wide range of mental development. The two functions it demands are memory and attention, with the further requirement that the attention shall not be distracted by other mental activities. That is why feeble-minded persons can play chess—because their minds cannot indulge in other activities to the exclusion of chess, which is so largely a function of memory and not of reasoning power. It is also why good executives are often good chess players, because they have cultivated their memories, and especially because they have cultivated the quality of attention.

### Chances Against Him

"As to whether Sammie can do anything except play chess, that can only be learned by experiment. By training him to spend his life as a chess champion, a wise and beneficent statesman may be lost to the world. But by giving him the normal boy's education, with the opportunity to choose his own path in life, the chances are that a chess champion will be lost through the complication of mental activities. He might always be a better than average player, though not a champion, but the chances are all against his remaining a champion if the activities of his mind are multiplied.

### SAMUEL RZEZEWSKI as he looked from the Olympic

low that all of us are really chess players, but we have too much else to think about. Whether that is really so cannot be proved, but it should not be doubted that chess and checker players are cases of simple minds, or simplified minds, doing what is most obvious in the light of the rudimentary forms of mentality.

### Doesn't Study Chess

Professor Shaw's statement about the visualizing type of memory makes of especial interest three facts about Sammie's chess playing. First, he does not study chess problems very hard. On the contrary, he is quite likely not to touch a chess board from one match to the next. Second, he watched his father play chess for an indefinite period before he himself began to play, his father being a better than average player, though not a champion, and in the four years Sammie has been playing or watching chess he has seen or met all kinds of players and varieties of combinations on the chessboard. The third fact deals with the way Sammie plays a match against numerous opponents.

He is on the inside of a rectangle of memory, with all of his opponents facing him. At West Point he was on the inside of a rectangle, it took him about ten minutes to move around the rectangle, stopping long enough at each board to make a move. The rules require each opponent to make a move as soon as Sammie stops in front of his board. If the opponent does not move, it is equivalent to acknowledging defeat and withdrawing from the game. Sammie's opponents at West Point thus had each an average of ten minutes to study the board between moves. Sammie, on the other hand, made his moves in an average time of between two and three seconds after his opponent's fingers had been removed from the pieces. The longest time he took for any play was ten seconds. And he was carrying on twenty games at once.

### What of the Future?

All of which is conclusive in favor of Professor Shaw's visualizing type of memory and highly developed function of attention.

Come the questions of whether Sammie will remain a chess champion, whether he will ever be able to do anything else with special efficiency and whether he can combine chess championship with something else.

Professor Thorndike, of Columbia University, recalls a boy of four years who was a mathematical prodigy, but by the time the boy was ten years old other things had taken his interest and he had ceased to be much more than ordinarily efficient at mathematics. He says of another boy:

"At thirteen he was a chess prodigy, and by the time he was seven years old he played a much better game and was champion of Boston. But that was twenty years ago. Since then the complicated affairs of life have demanded his attention. He is still an exceptionally good chess player, but he is no longer a champion.

### Close Attention Needed

"In all the cases we know of, examination shows that the child's attention has been attracted and his interest held by the particular thing he does so well. Many times a child does some one thing remarkably well, but loses his facility when his interest wanes.

"On the other hand, some persons are born with a little green spot or a brown spot in the center of the pupil of the eye. Infants are born with six toes. There are many peculiarities that mark children at birth. Why may they not be born with a particular talent to mark them out from other children, the ability to play chess, for example, with Samuel Rzezewski? We don't know. We know that some children are born defective, but we don't know whether some are born with distinguishing talents.

### The Question of Poets

"John Keats never did anything great except to write poetry. But that does not prove poets are born and not made. His sense of rhythm and rhyme may only have been exquisitely developed because his interest was aroused in them by chance at an early age and his attention was never strongly attracted to anything else."

So the answer to the question, Is Sammie Rzezewski, the eight-and-one-half-year-old chess champion, a prodigy? seems to be: We don't know. We can tell a defective, but we can't tell a prodigy, or if there is such a thing. Some day we may learn to develop all the latent possibilities of the normal man, and then, surely, there will be no such thing as a prodigy. Or some of us may be born with a chess spot in the brain, like a green spot in the eye. And, in that case, there are prodigies.

### SAMMIE RZEZEWSKI, eight-year-old chess champion

tion of infant prodigies, and a tour would bring fortune as well as fame. Sammie and his parents landed in New York shortly after the receipt of the letter.

### Never Been to School

At eight and one-half years Sammie weighs fifty-five pounds, and to one of us he would appear undersized, but those who know the race say he is not noticeably smaller for a Polish Jew child of his age. His head is flat on top and wide above the ears, while his chin is small and pointed. His eyes are small, bright and shrewd, his features are small and his expression is in some ways older than his father's, who is stout, bearded and jovial. But we are all familiar with the prematurely sophisticated children on the East Side, and that seems to be the type of the Rzezewski family. Sammie's carriage suggests that he has a slight double curvature of the spine.

The boy has never been to school. Nevertheless, Sammie speaks Yiddish and German, has a word or two of French and is beginning to learn English. He understands English better than he speaks it. He reads Yiddish fluently and German without a great deal of difficulty. Every day he reads a chapter in the Talmud, but such parts of the Talmud as refer to the sex relations he is not allowed to read. He can write his name in Yiddish script.

He knows the relative positions of such countries and cities as he has visited, but he knows nothing of geography as children learn it from books in school. He can tell time. Ten days ago he knew the hours and half hours, and on November 12 surprised his family by knowing the quarter hours. He knows nothing of mathematics, but knows well how to drive a bargain, appreciates money values and understands thoroughly the difference between \$5 and \$10. He is an excellent judge of time and distance, as he shows in buying, and has an unusually good musical sense. He likes grand opera and symphonies, but has no use for jazz. He sings airs from several operas in a pleasant childish voice, but cannot read music and has no acquaintance with any musical instrument. When, with the aid of two tuning forks, the reason for the difference in pitch of the two notes was explained to him he understood readily.

There doesn't seem to be anything abnormal about Sammie, unless his ability to play chess is abnormal, and that is what we are trying to find out. He likes to play better than to study, but he can be persuaded to study; generally it is a question of reward. But there is nothing unusual about that. His parents humor him about study and play. They try to give him his education sugar coated, and if he doesn't want to take it it is not forced on him. Nevertheless, he is not backward. If he is a defective he has not given any signs of it. He is quick enough to learn when he does give himself to it. He just seems the normal boy of his years whose parents are situated a little better than the average.

### Is Fond of Exercise

The amusements he likes best are boxing and bicycle riding. He is crazy to see the six-day bicycle races in Madison Square Garden next month, and his present ambition is to be a champion bicycle rider. He puts on the gloves with Samuel Kramer, the boy violinist. Sammie Kramer is seven and a half years old and weighs ninety-seven pounds, forty-two pounds more than Sammie Rzezewski, but Sammie Rzezewski invariably beats Sammie Kramer.

They put on the gloves in the bedroom, and little Sammie maneuvers his opponent until his back is to the bed. Then Sammie dives head first into Kramer, knocks him over onto the bed, jumps on top of him and beats him up.

Although he boxes under London prize ring rules, he plays chess according to the Marquis of Queensberry. "He is a good sport at chess and neither bites and gouges nor crows over a loser. Mostly, he whistles very softly while playing chess, a barely audible vibration. If his opponent makes a bad move he is likely to ask, 'Do you want to make that move?' And if the answer is 'Yes,' Sammie probably will give one more chance with the queen.

### Samuel Made Good

After the armistice was signed Mr. Rzezewski decided that it would be some time before business in Poland would pick up enough for it to be worth while to reopen his place in Lodz. In the mean time, there was Sammie, the boy wonder. Why not travel with him? Mr. Rzezewski, with his wife and Sammie, toured Europe, exhibiting Sammie as a chess champion. And the child made him of his marvelous nephew, and he suggested that the Rzezewski family come to America, where conditions were more suitable to the apprecia-

tion of infant prodigies, and a tour would bring fortune as well as fame. Sammie and his parents landed in New York shortly after the receipt of the letter.

"You are satisfied, are you?" On a second affirmative reply he will shrug his shoulders with the remark, "I am sorry for you," and go on to victory. At the end of the game he knocks over the men with a sweep of his hand. That is his only evidence of triumph.

### Dislikes Publicity

Sammie does not like to be "shown off." It is not that he is bashful or sullen, but that he has had too much of it. He is tired of the operation and people are likely to ask him too complicated questions, thinking because he plays such a wonderful game of chess he must have an advanced mind. Chess he does not talk about to any one who does not understand the game, but will play with any one except a good player. A new acquaintance wanted to play chess with him and got out the board and arranged the players. Sammie sat down for the game, but his opponent's first move showed that he was inexperienced and Sammie closed the board and put it away.

"You don't know how to play chess," he said.

When I saw him I had been warned of his peculiarities and made no attempt to discuss chess or philosophy or the League of Nations or anything like that with him. He held aloof for some time, watching for me to produce some of the things he objects to, but after he decided that I was safe he loosened up and showed me how he could turn somersaults on the bed. He would not box with me, because he said I was too big for him, but he would fence with his own. With a great deal of difficulty he was persuaded to write his name for me and wrote Samuel in Hebrew script.

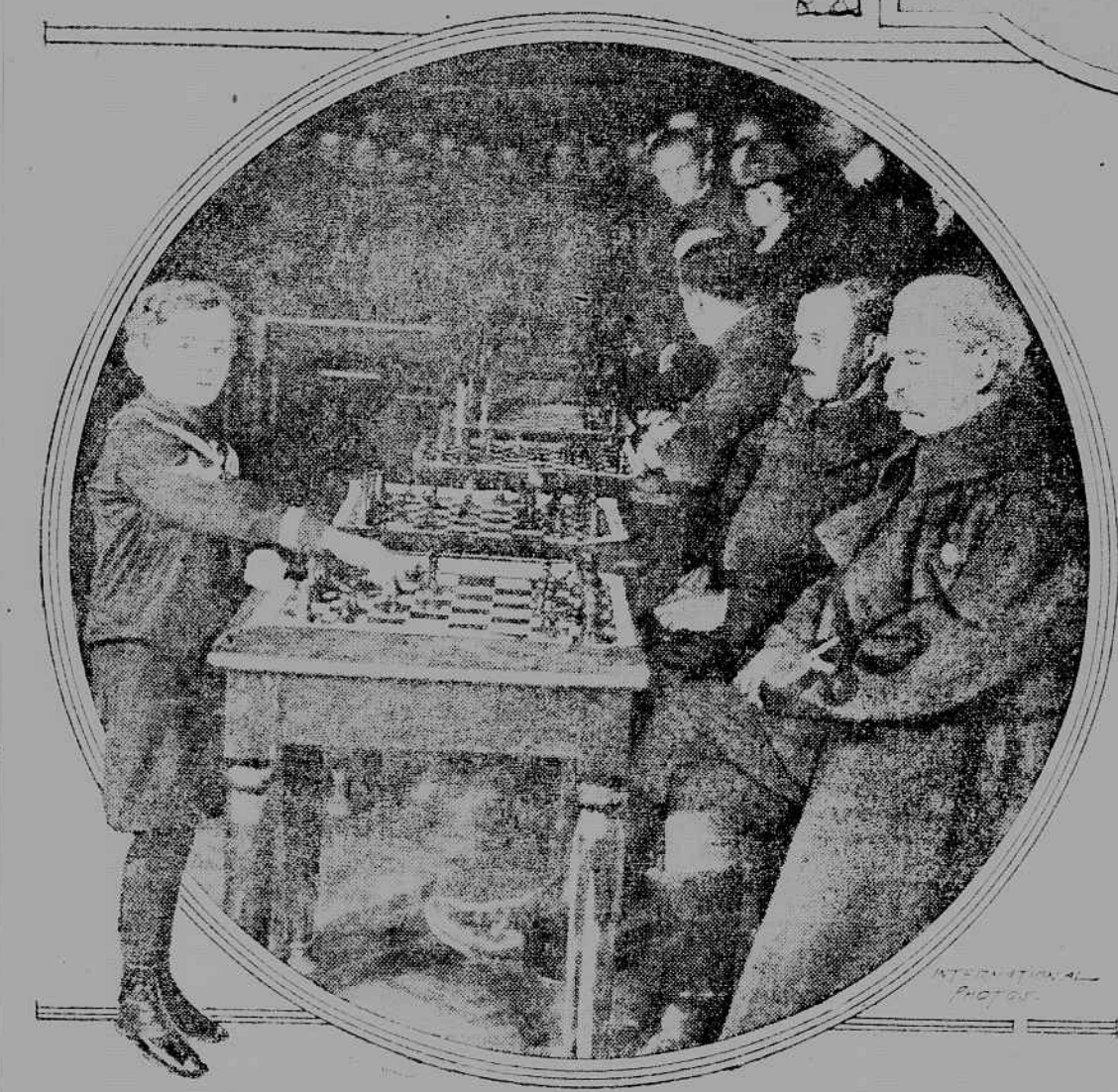
"That's enough," he said. "I won't write the rest. It's too much trouble."

I could not see anything about him to differentiate him from any normal boy. And now, let us see what the psychological sharps say. Professor Shaw, of New York University, says:

### Dr. Shaw's Opinion

"When the psychologist is called upon to explain, if he can, the mental operations of a chess or checker marvel, he can do no better than contrast these weird operations of the brain with the normal workings of the mind. Before this contrast is taken up it is well to note that among the three great types of mind in the form of memory there is the visualizing type, whereby the possessor thereof can exercise a kind of second sight which, in some cases, may appear uncanny. It is quite likely that this prodigy is a visualizer to a high degree of intensity. By means of such visualizing, which most of us employ when we

HERE Sammie is playing twenty French chess experts simultaneously. Sammie won every game in this tournament



AT WEST POINT, playing twenty games simultaneously, Sammie won nineteen of them and obtained a draw with Colonel G. A. Sieberger, the chess champion of the post, who is sixty-two years old

try to recall a telephone number by viewing it in a sort of mental space, the child player is able to see the state of affairs upon the board as it is, as it will appear after the next move of the piece, as it must appear after a certain number of likely moves have been made.

"To this art of visualizing there may be added the general function of attention, a mental faculty, so to speak, which proceeds by subjective and objective, social and historical causes. One who has played an off-hand game of checkers realizes that he is attentive to certain common situations which arise in, say, the double or single corners. As his play improves, his attention is able to embrace still others of these possible arrangements among the pieces on the board. In contrast with this simple situation in a simple game, we have the attentional power of a

child who is able to 'size up' the totality of a complicated situation, as this is experienced in chess. Such a vital form of attention must be possessed by this youth who is performing marvels of mentality along the simple lines of vision and attention.

### A Matter of Inhibitions

"Still another psychological condition may operate in the special case before us. It may be stated openly by noting that defectives are often marvels at lightning calculation, piano playing, chess and checkers. Psychology would seek an explanation of these phenomena by citing the general cause of inhibitions, as they are called. This amounts to saying that the average person, as the business man, the professional man, has many of these inhibitions—that is, ideas, problems, cares and the like which step in and tend to

destroy the special workings of the mind. In the case of the defective or the child, there are few of these inhibitions, few of these extra peculiar to practical life in a busy world. Thus the person with the simplified mind, as we may call it, may easily give himself up to a set of mental operations, such as seeing, paying attention and remembering, which are all simple enough, but which are interfered with by the common inhibitions of a mind which has many things to think about.

"In connection with checkers, it is usually the old man in the country who is famous for his shots and traps. With chess, it may well happen that a child will play with marked success. This is explicable in the light of what has been said, namely, the old man and the child, like the defective, have little else to think about. From this it should fol-

## The Tide—By Stewart Edward White

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felt that this would have been sufficient had the cases been reversed. In answer to a question as to whether he considered it fair to place the burden of safety on the other man, he replied:

"Among motorists it is customary to exchange the courtesies of the road—and sometimes the discourtesies," he added, with a faint scorn.

THE earthquake and fire of 1906 caught him in town. During three days and nights he ran his car for the benefit of the sufferers, going practically without food or sleep, exercising the utmost audacity and ingenuity in getting supplies, running fearlessly many dangers.

usually, he belonged to the best clubs, both city and country. He sailed a yacht expertly, was a keen fisherman, hunted. Also he played poker a good deal and was noted for his accurate taste in dress.

His mother fondly believed that he caused her much sorrow, his sisters looked up to him with a little awe, his father down on him with a fiercely tolerant contempt.

For "Chuck" had had his turn in the offices. His mind was a good one, his education, both formal and informal, had trained it fairly well; yet he could not quite make good. Energetic, ambitious, keen young men, clamoring upward from the food or sleep, exercising the utmost audacity and ingenuity in getting supplies, running fearlessly many dangers. For the rest he played polo well, shot excellently at the traps, was good at tennis, golf and bridge. Nat "Chuck" was asked merely to add,

to what he already had more than enough of by means of a game that itself did not interest him.

LATE one evening "Chuck" and some friends were dining at the Club House. They had been cruising up toward Tomales Bay and had had themselves not ashore here. No one knew of their whereabouts. Thus it was that "Chuck" first learned of his father's death from an evening paper handed him by the major domo. He read the article through carefully, then went alone to the beach below. It had been the usual sensational article, and but two sentences clung to "Chuck's" memory: "This fortunate young man's income will actually amount to about \$10 a minute. What a six-nificance have now his days—and nights!"

He looked out to sea whence the waves, in ordered rank, cast themselves on the shore, soaked upward along the sands, poised and ready.

His thoughts were many, but they always returned to the same point. Ten dollars a minute—roughly speaking, seven thousand a day! What would he do with it? "What a significance have now his days—and nights!"

His best friend, Joe Merrill, came down the path to him and stood silently by his side.

"I'm sorry about your governor, old man," he ventured; and then, after a long time: "You're the richest man in the West."

"Chuck" Gates arose. A wave larger than the rest thundered and ran hissing up to their feet.

"I wonder if the tide is coming in or going out," said "Chuck," vaguely.

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