

THE TURK



ERNEST WITTENBERG



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On April 13, 1826, a strange-looking contraption was wheeled into the assembly rooms of the new National Hotel at 112 Broadway in New York City. It featured a lifelike wooden figure of a turbaned Turk, seated before a table-high maple chest three and a half feet long by two feet deep. The figure's right arm rested lightly beside a chessboard eighteen inches square permanently affixed to the top of the chest, and his left hand held a long-stemmed clay pipe.

The contrivance was a mechanical chess player, which, its promoter announced, would meet - and beat - anyone who wished to challenge it. Two enthusiastic amateurs accepted the challenge, and, in turn, the Turk soundly trounced them, triumphantly crying "Échec!" ("Check!"). Twice a day thereafter, at noon and 8:00 p.m., the left-handed automaton repeated his performance, vanquishing every opponent who volunteered. Adult spectators packed the house and paid fifty cents - children under twelve paid twenty-five cents, but got part of it back in candy - for the privilege of watching a machine outthink a man.

At the receiving end of the cash and the distributing end of the candy was Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, a German-born impresario, musician, and inventor of musical mechanisms, including the instrument marketed today as the Metronome de Maelzel. The Turk and Maelzel had arrived in New York in February from Paris, a few boats ahead of the sheriff, along with the rest of Maelzel's variety show of automatons, a life-sized French draagoon trumpeter and a pair of twenty-inch wooden mannequins who danced and tumbled on a thirty-foot slack rope to Maelzel's piano accompaniment.

Newspaper coverage was detailed and full of admiration. The *Evening Post* gave the show more than a column of choice space, concluding that "Nothing of a similar nature has ever been seen in this city that will bear the smallest comparison with it." The *Commercial Advertiser* echoed the *Post's* praise. The papers were so full of the Turk that one of them felt compelled to apologize; its excuse was that "persons at a distance can form no idea of how much the attention of our citizens is occupied by it." Peale's Museum at 258 Broadway was close enough to form an idea, however, and by May 7, it was attempting to lure some of the overflow crowd with a collection of

"mechanical paradoxes and curiosities made in Philadelphia in imitation of those by Mr. Maelzel."

But even at half the price, Peale's imitation couldn't hold a candle to the proceedings at the National, where Maelzel himself - a stout, flamboyant, animated, and urbane man of fifty-four - introduced the original cast, beginning with its gray-eyed intellectual star. The Turk was rolled into the hall on casters, and Maelzel moved it around the room to give the spectators a clear view. Then, to prove that no one was hidden inside the chest, he systematically opened each of its three doors, as well as the long narrow drawer beneath.

The inspection, aided by a candle, revealed a crowded display of levers, wheels, pinions, and gears on the left side; a cushion and a set of chessmen in the long drawer; and two pieces of quadrant-shaped brass in the cloth-lined main compartment, which lay behind the double doors at right.

With doors flapping, Maelzel swung the Turk around, raised his drapery, and exposed two more tiny doors, one in the figure's lower back and the other in its left thigh, both filled with machinery. He now asked for a volunteer to play a game of chess with what had just been clearly demonstrated to be a pure machine. Twelve feet from the Turk's board on the audience side of the silk-cord barrier, a small table was set up for the brave opponent. When the volunteer was seated facing the automaton, Maelzel took away the Turk's pipe and gave him a cushion to support his left elbow. After closing the doors, the drawer, and the peepholes, he then wound up the automaton with a key in its left side and rolled the Turk into playing position while the machinery clanked and whirred up a racket. The Turk moved first, a privilege he always took, and Maelzel made the same move on the opponent's board. For the rest of the game, he shuttled between the two boards, acting as messenger for both sides.

Contests like these had been baffling Europeans for over half a century, ever since 1769, when the mustachioed Turk had been built by Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen as a conversation piece for the parties of his empress, Maria Theresa, in Vienna. Von Kempelen took it on a glittering tour, during which the Turk defeated Frederick the Great and George III and played the

distinguished American ambassador to Paris, Benjamin Franklin. The German-born Maelzel, who had built his reputation on unusual music machines of all shapes and sizes, acquired the automaton from von Kempelen's son in 1805. Shortly thereafter, he lost it again, under bizarre circumstances.

In 1809, when Maelzel, as chief "mechanician" to the court, was staying at Castle Schönbrunn, Napoleon seized for his headquarters during the Battle of Wagram. According to one account, the Turk conquered the conqueror in their first game, but during the rematch, Napoleon decided to see how the automaton acted under stress. He made a false move, an affront the Turk acknowledged by rapping the table, shaking his head, and replacing the piece. Napoleon made the same move a second time, with the same result. The third time, the Turk lashed out and swept all his opponent's chessmen to the floor. Napoleon murmured, "*C'est juste*," and went on to lose by the rules.

Eugène de Beauharnais, the emperor's stepson, insisted on purchasing the Turk from its proprietor for 30,000 francs, and Maelzel accepted. He had to wait until 1817 before he could buy it back again - on convenient credit terms that allowed him to stretch out the payments for several years. He found it hard to meet even these generous terms, however, and in 1825, when the executors of the Beauharnais estate sent process servers after him, he hastily gathered the Turk and the rest of his company together and set sail for New York, just one jump ahead of the law. With a new set of clothes, a rakish feather in his turban, a little oil in the machinery, and a voice box in his innards, the Turk was ready to take on all comers in the New World.

What the challengers didn't know was that the clatter of the Turk's internal contrivances was merely a smokescreen. When Maelzel started the machinery, the automaton's genie, an attractive and nimble Frenchwoman ingeniously concealed behind the machinery in the chest, slid into the main compartment on a tiny stool mounted on rails. There she lit a candle and prepared for the game by setting up a portable chessboard and arranging the pantograph equipment that moved the Turk's arms. The chest was the perfect counterpart of a magician's trick-table; it could accommodate even a tall person with reas-

onable comfort once the doors were closed. During the public viewing, however, the lady raced through a complicated set of calisthenics to escape detection - gliding through sliding partitions on casters, even shifting the machinery, all of which was movable. The construction of the chest virtually guaranteed invisibility. In case of a sudden hitch in the routine, a set of prearranged signals told Maelzel to stop before any embarrassing disclosures could be made.

Maelzel's first choice for the New York debut had been an itinerant Alsatian chess tramp named William Schlumberger, whom he had met in Paris. There the Alsatian played day and night at the Café de la Régence, the smoky, crowded, mirror-lined mecca of chess players on the Rue St. Honoré, and earned a few francs for board and lodging by teaching the game. Schlumberger agreed to join the Turk in New York as soon as Maelzel could afford to send him the money for passage. Meanwhile, the Frenchwoman, whose chess skills wouldn't have qualified her as a bus boy at the Café de la Régence, embarked with the company at Le Havre on the packet ship *Howard* on December 20, 1825. During the month-and-a-half voyage to New York and the two-and-a-half-month delay before the show opened, she was tutored by Maelzel on how to play chess in a box.

From her vantage point in the main compartment of the chest, she had a view of the underside of the Turk's chessboard. Underneath, the squares were numbered from one to sixty-four, with a lever and a metal disc attached to the bottom of each square. The Turk's chessmen were magnetized, and when a piece was moved onto a square on the surface, the disc under it descended on its lever. The operator waited for a disc to rise under another square and then duplicated her opponent's move on a second, scale-model chessboard at which she played. This board had pegged chessmen; in addition, each of its sixty-four squares had a hole. When it was the Turk's move, she lifted a metal rod that extended through the figure's left arm to his gloved hand, and the Turk's arm simultaneously left the cushion. When the point of the rod was inserted into one of the sixty-four holes of the operator's board, the Turk's hand hovered over the corresponding piece on his board above.