

# “Emma Zunz” as Endgame

By Céline Roos

*Translated from the French by the author, who is a chess instructor.*

I want to consider the idea that Borges’s tale “Emma Zunz” is related to the game of chess. As a chess player I see in “Emma Zunz” many references to the game of chess. I imagine that this tale is built as a sequence of chess moves ending in checkmate.

That Borges had an interest in chess seems without doubt. When he was young, his father demonstrated to him the idea of the paradox of Zeno, with the help of a chess board. Fernando Arrabal<sup>1</sup> mentions that Borges related this to him, during one of their conversations, adding that his father had been quite a strong chess player. In “There Are More Things” from the collection *The Book of Sand*, the narrator remembers that his uncle used a chess board to explain the paradoxes from Elea to him. Borges also wrote one or two poems using the game of chess as a theme.

What persuades me to consider this tale as a story happening on a chessboard is a sentence appearing in the epilogue of *The Aleph*, where “Emma Zunz” was first collected. It starts by: “Fuera de Emma Zunz, cuyo argumento tan espléndido, tan superior a su ejecución temerosa me fue dado por Cecilia Ingenieros...”<sup>2</sup> This phrase reminds me of a maxim that most chess players know: “The threat is stronger than the execution.” I have the feeling that this sentence applies not only to Borges’s creation, but also to Emma’s action. In fact, Emma plans to kill Loewenthal after having made him confess his guilt (the embezzlement for which her father was accused) and after having exposed “the daring stratagem which would permit the Justice of God to triumph over human justice.” But Emma does not really achieve her goal, her victim dying without having understood her motives. I see here a similitude to the arrow which never attains its goal, or Achilles losing the race with the tortoise in the paradoxes of Zeno. Here appears a second idea, which was developed with the help of other competent readers. I posted this idea to the Borges List, and M. Juan Miguel Bozzarelli made an interesting contribution:

Maybe it was Poe who settled the rules for this game:

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. AT LENGTH I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado”

Here’s where she fails, as she can’t be aware whether Loewenthal knows why he is dying or not. The doubt (its oscillating nature) makes me think of (in the context of these chess related arguments) of a perpetual check situation. Can it be?

Poe himself wrote about the game of chess, for example there is a short story<sup>3</sup> about an automated chess player.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between Emma Zunz and chess may also be seen reflected in the names found throughout the story. Loewenthal<sup>5</sup> was one of the strongest chess players from the end of the XIX c. and the beginning of the XX c. He played a match against Morphy. Aaron is the first name of Nimzovitsch who was the inspired theoretician of hyper-modern chess. Urstein, the primordial stone: a chess piece can be called in German *eine Figure*, or *ein Stein*. Kronfuss reminds us of a crown. The names Fein, Fain, and Finn appear in “Emma Zunz.” There is an Irish hero called Finn, who plays chess. We find him in the Fenian Cycle, which is one of the four cycles of the corpus of early Irish tales.<sup>6</sup> The deceased wife of Loewenthal is “a Gauss.” Gauss evokes the great scientist in Mathematics and Astronomy who imagined the non-Euclidean Geometry<sup>7</sup> and the  $\epsilon$ -number. Furthermore, Gauss is known in the chess world for having resolved the problem of the eight queens.<sup>8</sup>

The name Tarbuch (the mill owner) is a kind of a puzzle. During the Spanish war, the tarbuch, a red fez (a conically shaped hat cut off at the top) was frequently part of Spanish Africa corps dress. To me, other ideas seem associated with this name. Tarbuch reminds me of the Torah and the Talmud, the sacred books (book = *Buch* in German). Loewenthal swears in a mixture of Yiddish and Spanish when he is fatally wounded. Now, like myself, many chess players are either of Jewish belief or origin. One of the reasons advanced for this fact is that playing chess is one of the occupations allowed during the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> This fact is so clear that a former chess world champion, Alekhine, wrote anti-Semitic articles during the Second World War, comparing Jewish chess to Aryan chess.

On the Borges List, M. Bozzarelli followed this idea and then found something which gives an explanation of the portrait of Milton Sills (under which Emma hides the letter):

According to some versions of the Creation, (Torah, Talmud), the first woman on earth was Lilith; created not of male substance, but of impure filth and blood that made for her bad tempered manners and evil spirit. . . .<sup>10</sup> The Sumerian name was *Lillake*: bearing this name she appears in a tablet dated 2000 BC from the city of Ur (Ur-stein, the stone from Ur) containing parts of Gilgamesh. . . . In the tablet, she clearly stands on top of a couple of lions. (Loew, as in Loewenthal = valley of the lion)<sup>11</sup> Borges mentions her in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Just another detail: Milton Sills, the one of the portrait, was a movie star back in the 20's. He starred in a box office success of his time: *Adam's Rib*.

There is also the strategy calculated step by step by Emma. The same idea appears twice. Borges often uses words in their etymological sense. The word ‘cinematógrafo’ decomposed means then the notation of movement. Chess players keep records of their games using an algebraic notation (which looks like ‘e2 - e4’) or the older notation (which looks like ‘white king’s pawn [Kronfuss?] moves two squares forward’). Thus they are able to replay the moves of a game played before in the same way that football players record and look at the video of games played previously. They can then observe where they made mistakes or their opponents weaknesses.

Related also in the text is a state that, as a chess player, I experienced myself sometimes, knowing that I am tired, I am very careful to remain concentrated on the game.

How can this piece of life of Emma Zunz be similar to the final sequence of a game of chess?

In the introduction of the story, when Emma learns of the death of her father, she realises that it is “the only thing that has happened in the world, and that it would go on happening endlessly.”<sup>12</sup> I recall the poem “Ajedrez.”<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that Emma’s name ‘Zunz’ looks like a snake eating its tail; it starts and finishes by the letter z, and the letters u and n are visually the same but

symmetrically opposite from the point of view of an horizontal line. I imagined then the alphabet cycling like a snake eating its tail, and decided to see what would be the relation of the letters u and n, if read in the other direction; the letter u (the twenty first letter in the alphabet) becomes e (the fifth letter) and the letter n (the fourteenth letter) becomes l (the twelfth letter), if the letter z and the letter a are the same, we obtain then the word alea in place of the word zunz. There is a similar effect of “closing the circle” which is contained in the relation of the story. If after a reading of “Emma Zunz,” I start again to read it, I can immediately notice that the beginning of the story following the end of it would give a coherent narration.

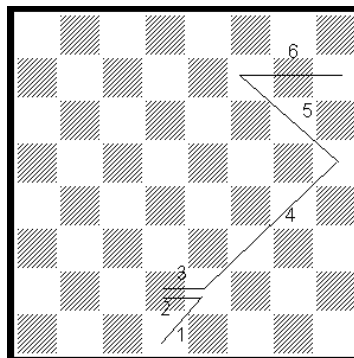
Now *alea* represents the game of chance. In Caillois classification of games, appear also *agôn* (competition or battle between doubles), *mimicry* and *ilinx* (vertigo).<sup>14</sup> R. Girard says that these four games categories correspond to the four main steps of the ritual’s cycle: imitation games (mimicry), competition games, battle of doubles (*agôn*), games of vertigo, hallucinatory paroxysm (*ilinx*), and sacrificial revolution (*alea*).<sup>15</sup> There are two sacrifices in this story: this of Emma’s to the sailor and the death of Loewenthal.<sup>16</sup> In “Emma Zunz,” we can see the imitation game (Emma plays a role towards Loewenthal, when she shows herself as an informer) as well as the vertigo game (during the episode of her encounter with the sailor). The *agôn* might be clear as well, considering the plan Emma builds in order to kill Loewenthal.

My first feeling in reading this story was that Emma was a queen, sacrificing herself in order to mate the king. It is interesting that the Spanish word for “killed” is “mate.” It is said that the word chess is driven from the Persian word “King” (Shah) and the term checkmate (*Schachmat* in German) from the Persian expression “the king died.”

Following my idea, I decided to look in the chess archives to see if any well-known game having been played in the past could fit Emma’s movements, and after some research, discovered the following.

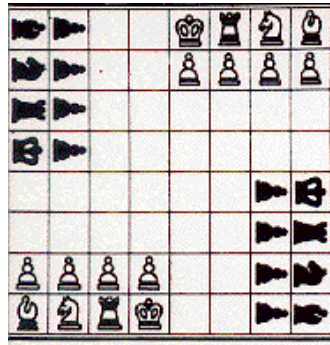
There was a famous game in 1916 [Yanowsky–Chaves (or Chajes), New York] which received a beauty prize.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the beauty prize was attributed for the nice play of white, which included a queen sacrifice. But, as François Le Lyonnais (one of the founders with Raymond Queneau of the French “Oulipo”, that is the “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”) showed later in his world-known book *Les Prix de beauté aux Echecs* (1970) that this game should not have been primed. Had Black not played a bad move (with his king), the game would have been equal. It was almost a suicide. White played nicely after that.

Here is a diagram showing the movements made by the white queen in this game.



The segments 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 correspond respectively to the white queen’s 9th, 14th, 15th, 20th, 21st and 28th moves. The 28th black move is rook takes queen; the 29th white move is rook takes rook and checkmate. The image of the moves gives two Z placed one on the top of the other and seen as through a mirror. It is also noticeable that the queen stays in a 7 by 5 shaped rectangle.

The queen seems to play in a space shaped by the quadrants of the white pieces from this old shatranj board:



The game of chess was very important in Russia after the revolution, as the new Soviet State considered it as a tool useful for the development of the proletarian culture. There was a Soviet chess set, dated from 1925, in which the Capitalist camp was opposing the new Socialist state: in the Capitalist camp, the king was a skeleton symbolising Death, the queen was Fortuna, the rooks were traditional Russian ships, and the pawns were workers in chains. In the Socialist camp, the king was a blacksmith, the queen a vigorous farmer woman, the bishops were Cossacks and the pawns were women holding corn reaped from the field.

In fact, it seems that the boat representing the rook is older than that. “To this day, the names of Chess pieces in Russia indicate Persian and Arabic origins. The following table is the Russian counter names to some of the European Chess pieces:

<i>European names</i>	<i>Russian names</i>	<i>Derived from</i>
Queen	Fyerzh	Vizier (Arabic)
Bishop	Slon	Slon (Arabic)
Rook	Rook ladia (boat)	Rokh (Persian-Arabic)

If my hypothesis is right, in the Yanowski – Chaves game, 1916, the queen’s sacrifice is accepted by a rook, in the short novel Emma’s sacrifice is accepted by a sailor coming from the Nordstjärnan ship.

This ship reminds me of the last novel written by Stefan Zweig, *Die Schachnovelle*, in 1942, as he was himself escaping with his wife from Austria to emigrate in Brazil. The story starts on a boat sailing to Rio de Janeiro, one of the passengers is the imaginary World chess champion Czentovics, another passenger is a mysterious Mr.B, the central character. Mr.B had been arrested in 1938 before the “Anschluss,” held in a hard reclusion where he was unable to communicate with anybody; he found a chess book containing the most beautiful chess games played in the world. He teaches himself chess, plays against himself, and God, and becomes incredibly strong. Arrived on the boat, he wants to play a real human player and on a real chessboard. He beats in a first game Czentovics and, at the great surprise of all the watchers, resigns the second game without apparent reason.

The excerpt: “y cuando la primera luz definió el rectángulo de la ventana” reminds me of a powerful image extracted from the movie *The Chess Player* made from the *Schachnovelle*.

During his reclusion, M.B challenges God in offering him the advantage of a pawn on the chess board designed on the ceiling by the light of the moon and the reflection of the cell’s bars.

The chessboard serves often to represent the game of chess, though it is also used in the world of finances. Cashiers used to a chequered carpet. Emma's father had been accused of embezzlement, and Loewenthal has as only talent this of keeping a fine dowry.

Looking at this game with the eyes of a chess player, I can imagine the following actions. Back home from the Tarbuch mill, Emma receives some news. The old king has been mated. Perhaps was it even a self-administrated checkmate. She resolves to represent the Justice of God in punishing Loewenthal. She acts and discusses as usual with her parallel friends about their Sunday. Then, she starts the application of her plan. She calls by phone Loewenthal, opening the trap. She offers herself to this man built like a rook, stockier than she is. The mate of the usurper soon follows her sacrifice.

“He is killed and never knows he dies so that a scene may be re-enacted.”

—The Plot.” *A Personal Anthology* by J. L. Borges

To try to elegantly conclude my discourse, I present to you an image. Mr. Bozzarelli sent it to me. Borges knew it.



—Céline Roos  
13 September 1999

## Footnotes

- (1) Playwright, chess player and writer, in his French book *Fêtes et Défaites sur l'Echiquier*.
- (2) Translation by D.A.Y in *Labyrinths*, U.K. Penguin Modern Classics, 1979.
- (3) The tale “Le joueur d’échecs de Maelzel” by Poe appears in an anthology translated into French by Baudelaire in “Histoires grotesques et sérieuses.” The whole book is called *Tous les contes d’Edgar Poe* in the Marabout collection. Poe writes in the translation of Baudelaire: “les manuvres gauches et rectangulaires de la poupée [inspirent] l’idée d’une pure mécanique livrée à elle-même.” Also, the reader may be familiar with the Jacques Villon painting “La Table d’échecs” 1919, where he tries the process of ‘constructive decomposition’—he is the brother of Marcel Duchamp—? In chess, we have a similar idea, that is to try, from a given position on the chess board, to imagine the moves which happened before. Some chess problemists specialise in the art of composing such positions (there must be only one key to the problem). Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe uses this idea of a retrospective analysis to solve a mystery.
- (4) For the story of the automaton, see: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/maelzel.html>
- (5) Loewenthal was one of the protagonist of the chess genius Morphy. Their famous match took place in 1858.
- (6) The Irish tales fall into four cycles: the Mythological Cycle; the Ulster (or Ultonian) Cycle; the Fenian Cycle, stories of Finn Mac Cumhaill and the warriors of the fiana; and the Historical Cycle, tales of ancient kings. Here is an extract of the tale “the Game of Chess” from the Diarmuid and Grainne tale in The Fenian Cycle.

After this Finn asked for a chessboard to play, and he said to Oisín, “I would play a game with thee upon this chessboard.” They sat down at either side of the board; namely Oisín and Oscar and the son of Lugaid and Diórúing the son of Dobar O’Baoscene on one side, and Finn upon the other side. Thus they were playing that game of chess with skill and exceeding cunning, and Finn so played the game against Oisín that he had but one move alone to make, and Finn said: “One move there is to win thee the game, O Oisín, but I am not there to teach thee that move.”

Amazingly, there even is a translator of Borges whose name is John M. Fein, he translated into English “The Lottery of Babylon” in the collection *Labyrinths* (Penguin modern classics).

- (7) About Mathematics and Writing: the French mathematician H. Poincaré who in his “Précis” about the theory of the ensembles used the Hebraic letter aleph to symbolise the transfinite number: “The number of operations to execute is infinite, it is even bigger than the zero-aleph.” *Vocabulaire philosophique* by Armand Cuvillier, Armand Colin, 1960.
- (8) In fact, this problem is not very hard and there are many keys to it: the idea is to have eight queens on a chessboard placed in such a way that none of them attacks another one. What is difficult is to find the idea generating all the possibilities.

See: <http://bridges.canterbury.ac.nz/features/eight.html>

- (9) This is only true if the person who plays chess is not a chess professional
- (10) “In mythology she seems to have been present among ancient Babylonians under the name of Lilith, a demon of the night, baby eater, and a temptress, and represented usually as a winged goddess with the legs of an owl.” Bozzarelli.
- (11) “This Lilith made her way into the Jewish myths of creation Jewish tradition associates her with the Snake Middle age witches owe her something, as seems to be true for today’s feminist movements. In literature: Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Eden Bower), also a great portrait (Lady Lilith).” Bozzarelli.
- (12) Translation by D.A.Y in *Labyrinths*, U.K. Penguin Modern Classics, 1979.
- (13) See: <https://www.vianegativa.us/2015/06/ajedrez-chess-by-jorge-luis-borges/>
- (14) *Les Jeux et les hommes* by Caillois, R, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, 1 volume
- (15) *Jeux d'échecs et Sciences Humaines* by Jacques Dextreit and Norbert Engel, Paris, Payot, 1984.
- (16) Macbeth. “Our acts continue on their destined way / which does not know an end. / I slew my sovereign so that Shakespeare / might plot his tragedy.” —J. L. Borges.
- (17) Here are the moves of Yanovski – Chaves, New York, 1916: 1. c4 Nf6 2. Nf3 e6 3. Nc3 d5 4. D4 Nbd7 5. Bg5 Be7 6. E3 dxc4 7. Bxc4 b6 8. 0-0 0-0 9. Qe2 Bb7 10. Rfe1 c5 11. Red1 a6 12. Rac1 b5 13. Bd3 Qb6 14. Qd2 Rfe8 15. Qe2 Rf8 16. Ne5 Rfe8 17. Dxc5 Nxc5 18. Bxf6 Bxf6 19. Bxh7+ Kxh7 20. Qh5+ Kg8 21. Qxf7+ Kh7 22. Nd7 Nxd7 23. Rxd7 Bc6 24. Ne4 Bxb2 25. Ng5+ Kh6 26. g4 g6 27. h4 Rh8 28. Qh7+ Rxh7 29. Rxh7 checkmate.
- (18) The lozenge is another quadrilateral shape which appears in “Emma Zunz” as in other of Borges stories. By the way, I don’t know if it is just a coincidence but the names of the two friends of Emma, Perla and Elsa, when put together, form almost an anagram of parallel (there is one letter ‘l’ missing). We know that a lozenge is a geometrical quadrilateral figure with parallel sides. The etymology of the word ‘lozenge’ is uncertain; one of the suppositions is that it comes from “lausa,” a word of Gaule (ancient France) meaning ‘flag stone.’

On the other hand, from the viewpoint of a chess piece, the squares of a chessboard must look like lozenges. The lozenges may indeed have many other connotations including Harlequin (Chesterton used this character sometimes) and the alternation from light and darkness.

Now these lozenges appear in many other tales written by Borges. There is for example the story “Avelino Arredondo,” in the *The Book of Sand*. This story contains characteristics which reminds me of the game of chess as well as of “Emma Zunz.” Being from the Red Party, Avelino Arredondo does not fear the Whites. Like Emma Zunz, he remembers and sees coloured lozenges that he had seen before; like her, he wants to perform an act of justice; like her, he spends some time almost out of time, and like her, he acts as a coward believing or knowing that he is not one. He is avaricious like Loewenthal. Avelino has a chessboard and pieces, but a rook is missing. The last scene where he kills the President seems to be a play, in which the actors (thirty or more) look like the thirty two

figurines of the chess game (some notables, prelates, and servicemen who look like the major pieces—queen and rooks—, the bishops and the pawns). As in “Emma Zunz,” the sentences in this tale are often negatives.

Borges offers, in “The Death and the Compass,” an explanation of this use of the lozenge. Just to resume the story, the Red Scharlach (a famous gunman) seems to commit three murders in three places of the town (which form an equilateral triangle). The murderer induces the detective to follow a pattern of the number three which is only a pretense. The North, East, and West clues should hint a fourth Southern place (thus making a lozenge) and a fourth crime (which will be the murder of the detective himself). In “The Death and the Compass,” the lozenge is a clue and a trap at the second level. We might wonder if this point is also true in “Emma Zunz.”