

THE RETURN OF BRIDGE TO ITS HOMELAND

Franco Pratesi – 03.03.1999

For each of the most successful inventions of human kind, almost every country likes to associate with them the name of someone (possibly of the same country!) who could have invented or introduced it. This practice was very prevalent in ancient times when, to almost everything, a notable discoverer was attributed be he or she a hero or a god. Bridge is an outstanding game and it is very remarkable that nobody – and no country! – has been acknowledged as its originator. Certainly, it is too modern an invention to require the intervention of a real god for its discovery. Nowadays, a hero is also somewhat outdated too, even though a Vanderbilt devising the rules of Contract Bridge on his own holiday cruiser may well be considered as belonging to this class.

But what about the first introduction of Bridge? Here a curious thing happens. We know that the rules of Bridge were first recorded and widely disseminated in London in the last decade of the 19th century, when it suddenly replaced Whist as the most played game. We read, however, that these rules originally came from Russia, Istanbul, the Riviera, Greece, Holland, or some other place. The first problem is thus to find the real country of origin. Actually, we can find witnesses and evidence of a kind that the first time this game was played was in 1873 near Istanbul at a table of four players, whose names are given in one of the few witnesses of Italian provenance.¹

In modern times, however, we have learnt to become suspicious of such witnesses and evidence. It appears hardly plausible that four players gather and abruptly devise the new rules for a complex game such as Bridge. A more probable explanation is that similar rules evolved somewhere by local innovation as was the common practice for the evolution of Whist variants. In support of this hypothesis is the fact that we know that different kinds of games belonging to the Whist family were actually played in various known places.

In the search for the origin of Bridge, we encounter several obstacles all difficult to overcome. In the second half of the 19th century, Greece, Holland, Russia, Turkey, all had a limited literature on games, and even today, this literature is not well known to card historians. In particular, it appears that, contrary to the common practice, no nation has proudly claimed the discovery of Bridge as its own. What we find instead, when we search in more detail, is that the rules present in any given place have been considered to be originating from elsewhere! Namely, the game is usually presented as come from a distant country. In England, Bridge is said to originate from exotic sources which are difficult to check while, in other countries, the game is often assumed as coming from England (apparently, the country where Bridge was codified, was also considered its country of origin). This fact I observed in particular in the Russian literature. I was excited when, after years of waiting for them, I received a few photocopies of early Russian descriptions of card games, only to read that the local Whist variants were usually considered of English origin, as indeed was Whist itself!

There is a second problem connected with the finding of where Bridge originated from before reaching London. Once Bridge had met with success in London, it spread to other countries and plausibly even returned to its country of origin. We might thus expect, that, in some place, the “new” game of Bridge coming from London, would be eventually recognised as an indigenous variant of Whist which had been played locally for decades!

Now, this did not occur in Paris, another leading centre in the history of games. Here the usual Whist had already been displaced several decades previously and substituted by the game of Mort thus foreshadowing the typical dummy of Bridge. I once believed that this game of Mort could be an essential step in the evolution of Bridge, but at most it could contribute only some of the new rules. As a matter of fact, when Bridge was shown to Parisian players,² they did not express the opinion that it was in practice the same game as they used to play!

On the other hand, when the new game of Bridge reached Russia, the local variants derived of Whist had themselves already evolved so much that they resembled more Auction-Bridge, at this

time a variant yet to come. If Bridge really was nothing more than a “Russian Whist”, then the original Russian variant had already been forgotten when Bridge returned to Russia in its new form.

It may thus be interesting to check in some intermediate countries where a variant of Whist, be it of Russian provenance or not, could evolve toward a Bridge kind of game. For instance, in Poland several Whist variants were played and it is alleged by the expert Hamerlinski-Dzierzozynski³ that Bridge was nothing else than the output of a system of Whist and local variants, played there for decades.

Maybe even more important is evidence arising from Austria and Germany. Here interesting sources exist from the 19th century. Thus, a complete book of games by Ulman⁴ in 1892 records and describes Russian Whist, Cayenne Whist, and Touren Whist, among similar games and also mentions different local ways in which they were played, with the frequent presence of a dummy player.

The book which has struck my attention, more than any other, is however a book printed in Leipzig in 1905 written by Dr. Richard Münzer and published by Grethlein & Co. Let me describe it in some detail. Leipzig was, by then, one of the leading publishing centres of the world and a couple of other books of general literature by the same author were also published there. Grethlein appears to have been a specialist publisher for books on sports and games (Sportverlag Grethlein & Co. can be read in the book) and the book belongs to a whole series, named “Bibliothek für Sport und Spiele” – Library for sports and games.⁵ This was a successful series, compiled by officers and specialists. Number 1 had been published in 1900, our book is No. 33, other items appeared in the following years. For many of their publications, the publisher offered three versions at increasing prices, soft-cover, cloth, and half-leather bound – thus making more than one hundred items together on sale, for years.

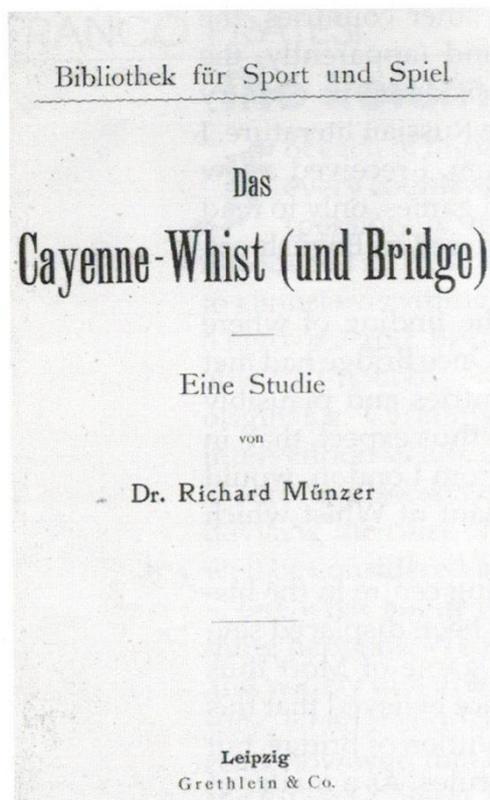


Figure 1 – Title page of Münzer’s book, described in the text.

The text is, however, not from Germany but from Vienna and it was meant to be an entire book devoted to Cayenne-Whist, then a popular variant of the old English Whist. This game was sufficiently successful to the point of deserving a whole book of its own to describe the rules and its characteristics. Plain Whist was by then outdated and it was now the time for its offspring to receive a full treatment.

Cayenne Whist can be found described in the American literature too. Thus, a fundamental reference book on Whist⁶ gives a short description (Appendix 1) and quotes the similarly fundamental reference book on games by Foster.⁷ Both authors however fail to mention that the common way of playing this variant in Central Europe during recent times, was with the use of dummy so making a much closer approach to Bridge-Whist. The game as described by Dr. Münzer includes other features which are also present in the original Bridge, such as Kontra and Rekontra – double and redouble – and herein with yet the third stage of Hirsch).

An essential fact is that this book is not intended to follow previous ones on Whist, neither in the series, nor in the intentions of the author. In the introduction by the author, it is clearly stated that the German literature on Whist (and not on Cayenne Whist!) is not satisfactory and this book aims to fill the gap providing a complete guide for all Whist players.

Now, the book is comprised of no less than 231 pages dealing with Cayenne-Whist, divided into 39 sections or chapters each of them considering a particular technical aspect of the game. There is, for us, a particularly interesting chapter entitled, 'Das Bridge' (Chapter 38 pp. 212 to 217). It is the last but one chapter, followed only by one on Whist psychology. In this penultimate chapter the essential rules of Bridge are outlined. Fundamental for us is that Bridge is introduced as a particularly beloved recent offspring of Cayenne-Whist, noting that the basic way of playing in the two games is practically identical.

The only remarkable difference between the games is stated to be that in Bridge no cayenne is selected but rather that the hierarchy of the four suits as trumps is already fixed from the beginning. Other differences are listed at the end of the chapter. Cayenne Whist is less affected by chance through card distribution, thus allowing for finer ways of play. Bridge would seem to be more suitable for beginners since a single trick may be essential for the result of the play and so causing the novice to play with attention. The scores and the money losses may, however, be much higher in Bridge.

It is most interesting to see how the book coming from Vienna is eventually printed in Leipzig. The text is apparently unchanged. The title page however already provides Bridge with more space than one could expect from the table of contents. The name of Bridge is there, albeit within brackets (see Fig. 1). Evidently the market for books about card games was already requiring a handbook on the new Bridge rather than a new handbook on traditional Cayenne-Whist. Actually the title of the book as printed on its cover, "*Lehrbuch des Bridge*", see Fig. 2, is the most revealing item – it has plainly become a Bridge treatise. One could see this book and acquire it for use as a manual for the 'new' game of Bridge.

In the course of editing and publishing Bridge was first introduced in the five pages of the 39th chapter, it then claimed a significant mention in parenthesis on the title page, it then went on to conquer the whole of the front cover on which there is no mention of Cayenne Whist – a rapid progress indeed. But this could only occur because of the great similarity existing between the two games!

I do not consider the publishing of a Whist treatise as one on Bridge was a deliberate attempt to mislead the buyer – rather I just consider that the new Bridge fashion coming from England, finally reached some place where the essential features of the game had been already known to the local players for decades. It is easy to see how a book, originally written for instruction in a popular local variant of Whist, could conveniently be adapted (by just selecting a special cover!) as a treatise on the game of Bridge which was, at that time, gaining more and more followers among local card players.

Leipzig and Vienna were linked rather closely at the time, and the game playing habits there would not have been expected to be very different. However, I am not saying that Bridge was born in either town. What occurred in London, when Bridge was codified over a decade, was nothing less than the return to London of the original game of Whist, deeply modified by the intervention of players in continental Europe; certainly with several contributions by Slav and German countries. These modifications of Whist developed over about half a century in diverse countries of Europe finally reaching Istanbul and other eastern capital cities.

When viewed from London, Bridge appeared to be a new game which displaced an older one. But seen from a European perspective, Bridge was the same basic game of Whist which was, however, no longer played according to its traditional rules but rather with modifications and several innovations which were developed according to local preference and eventually merging in a game so different from the original one that it had to be named Bridge-Whist or just Bridge. Were it not for this new name, it would have been more evident that it was nothing else than the result of a slow and complex evolution of the old Whist.

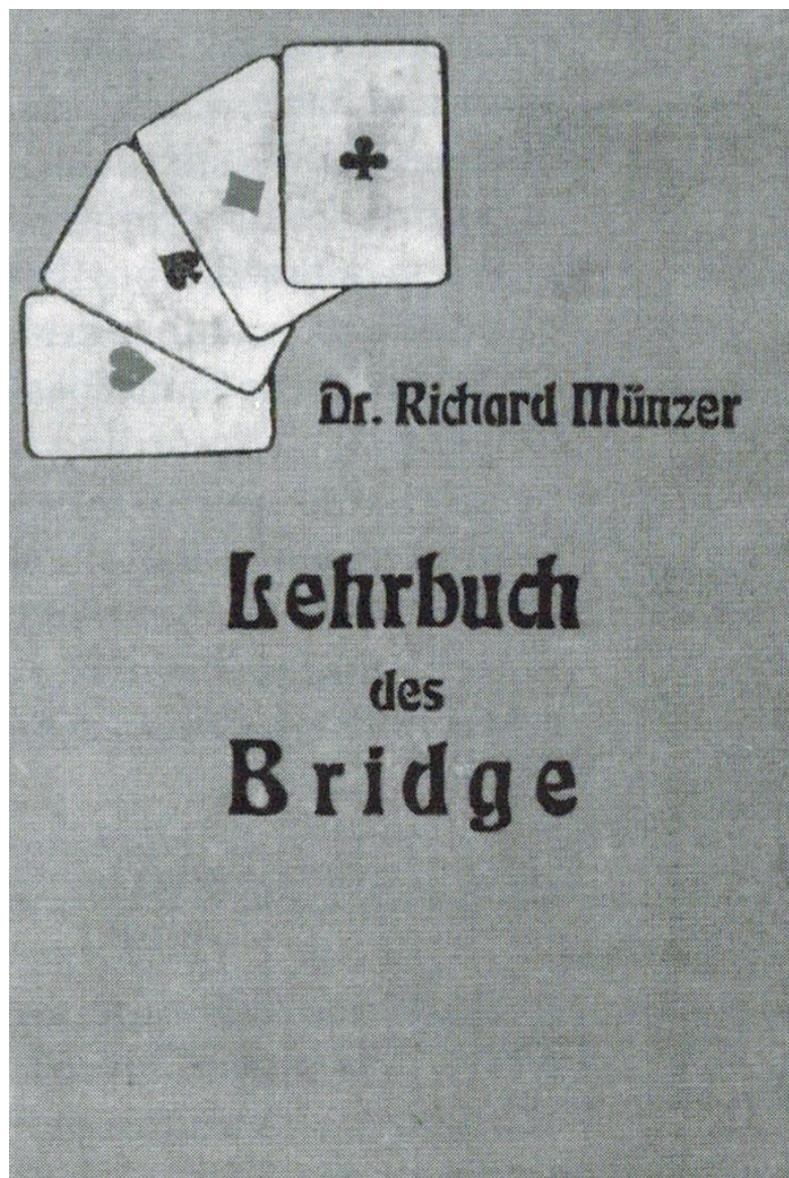


Figure 2 – Front cover of the same Münzer’s book.

APPENDIX 1 – CAYENNE

(verbatim reproduced from reference 6)

‘Cayenne’. One of the nineteen or more so-called varieties of Whist. It is played by four persons, and consists of ten points, each trick above six counting towards game. Honours are counted by those holding a majority, as follows: One for each honour held in excess of their opponents’, and one for honours in general. When the hand has been played, the points made by cards and by honours are multiplied by the value of the trump suit, and this is determined by the suit which is turned up [from a still pack], and which is called ‘cayenne’. ‘Cayenne’ does not necessarily become trumps, as the dealer and his partner have the option of naming another suit, if better suited to their hands, The ‘cayenne’ gives to its suits the first rank for that game, and the suit next in colour the second rank. The opposite colours rank third and fourth, for the purpose of counting. If the ‘cayenne’ or turn-up should be clubs, for instance, spades would be the second colour, hearts the third, and diamond the fourth. If clubs should be accepted as the trumps, the points made by cards and honours would be multiplied by four; if, instead of this, spades should be decided upon as trumps, the points would be multiplied by three; hearts as trumps, would cause the points to be multiplied by two; and diamonds, by only one. The dealer also has the privilege of announcing a ‘grand’, which is playing without any trump suit, in which case honours are not counted either, but every trick taken in excess of a book is multiplied by eight. Still another privilege accorded the dealer is the ‘nullo’. When he announces this, he and his partner invert the usual order of play, and propose to take as few tricks as possible. Every trick taken in excess of the book counts for the adversaries and is multiplied by eight. Honours are not counted. If the dealer makes his choice, his partner is bound by it; but if the dealer has not a hand justifying him in deciding, he may leave the choice of play to his partner. The latter must decide. The game is ten points, honours counting, as well as slams [little 4, proper 6]. The rubber is won by the side first winning four games of ten points each and any excess of points made over ten in one game counts on the next.

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