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GM Dr phil. Robert Hübner (6.11.1948 - 4.1.2025)



[Rob Bogaerts / Anefo](#), CC0, via Wikimedia Commons
Robert Hübner, Tilburg 1983

- not only a chess genius -

by Siegfried Schönle

[Original article in German is [here](#). Translation with [DeepL.com](#) (free version)]

Firstly, this remark before anything else:

In just a few words in this article, it is almost impossible to adequately honour the chess and academic work of the late GM Dr phil. Robert Hübner (6.11.1948 - 4.1.2025)^[1] in this article is simply not possible. The author would also like to ask for your understanding that he can only say a few things about Dr Robert Hübner. This is due to a lack of knowledge and language skills.

Instead, in reference to his own book title, *Elemente einer Selbstbiographie* [Elements of a Self-Biography], Berlin, Edition Marco 2015), some 'elements' of his biography will be recalled to the reader's memory.

This is an attempt to perhaps emphasise the lesser-known sides and interests of his personality.

A review of his entries in eight English- and German-language encyclopaedias revealed a fairly uniform picture: date of birth; learnt chess at the age of 5; his successes in decades after Büsum 1968 (see photo below); multiple World Championship candidate in around 20 years; participation in 6 World Championship cycles; papyrologist; various winning games at the end of the articles.

The focus of the articles in the encyclopaedias is, quite understandably, on the chess career. - So far so good!

Büsum 1968, p. 2. private archive H.-J. Hecht

Büsum, May 9 - 24, 1968: Robert Hübner, the young tournament winner, standing, second from right.

Today it is easy to find Robert Hübner's games from his best chess years, from the 70s to the 80s, on the Internet. The same applies to numerous tournaments in which he played. He took part in 11 Chess Olympiads between around 1970 and 2000. For this reason, no games will be included here and his chess career will not be the main focus.

Only so much about these decades, expressed in the words of the Romanian chess master Mihail Marin, should be brought to mind. Marin's book *Learn from the Legends: Chess Champions at their Best* deals with Rubinstein, Alekhine, Botvinnik, Tal, Petrosian, Fischer, Karpov, Korchnoi and Carlsen. GM Robert Hübner will certainly be counted among the 'legends' of chess. Perhaps a chapter will also be dedicated to Robert Hübner in the 2nd edition.

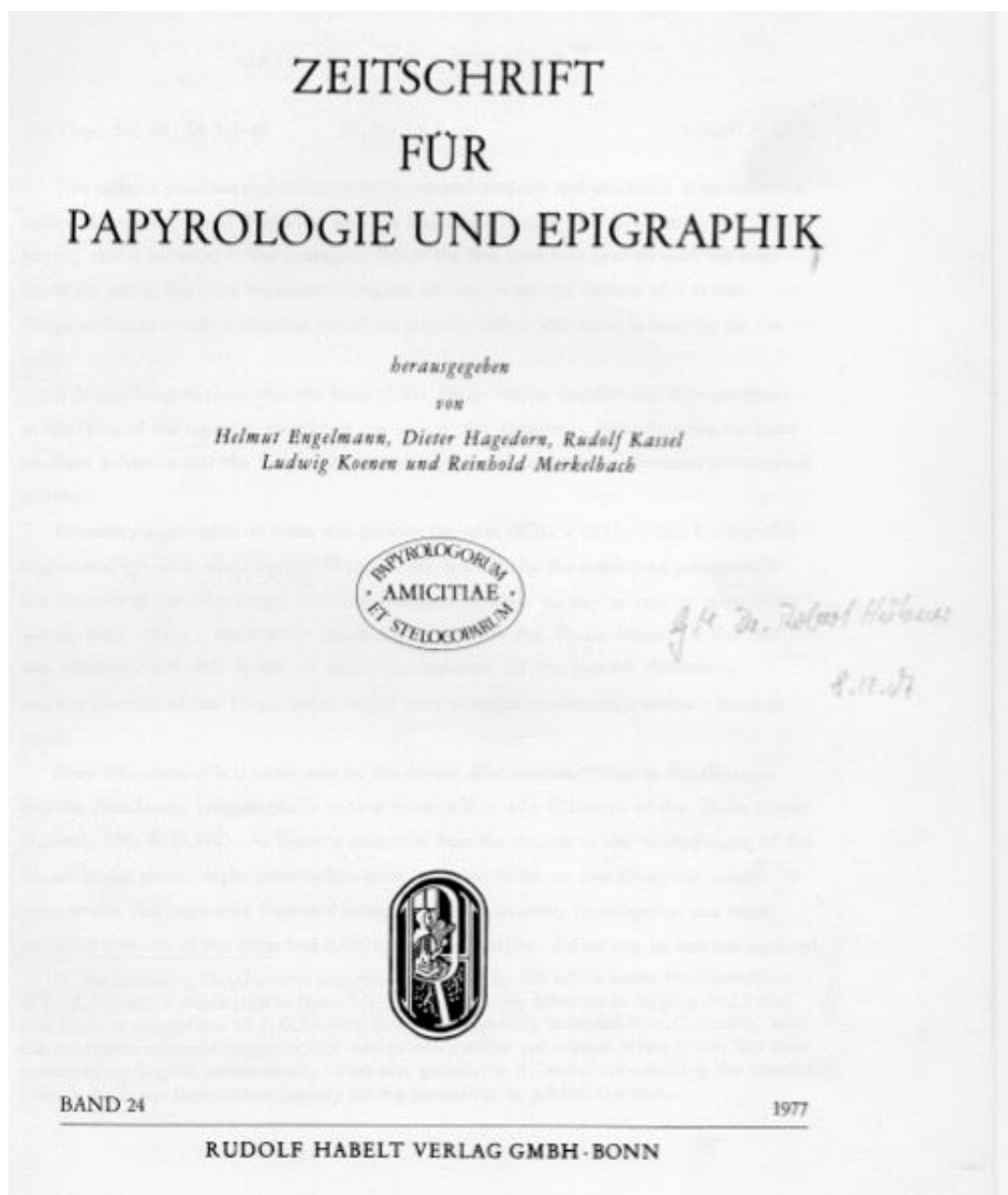
The words that describe these decades and thus R. Hübner at his chess peak sound martial: *Der Heldentöter* (Schach, 67th vol., 12/2013, p. 42). M. Marin is probably referring to the fact that R. Hübner was able to defeat many of his 'heroes', GMs playing at the highest level, during this period.

'Translating ancient Greek texts is a hundred times more fun for me than chess!' - he is reported to have said.

Robert Hübner studied Ancient Greek and Latin at the University of Cologne. He completed his doctorate in 1976 on everyday documents written on papyri.

Papyrology is the term used to describe the recording, processing and analysing of written sources preserved on papyrus. Papyrus was obtained from the papyrus plant, a reed grass, whose pith was cut into strips, joined together seamlessly and pressed in two layers in a composite system. The papyri he translated and analysed date back to the 1st century BC. A facsimile of such a document was printed in SPIEGEL, No. 46/1976 (p. 124). The classical philologist R. Hübner greatly appreciated these scholarly works.

The title of the magazine and an example of a document containing the oath of a dyke supervisor are shown here.



The offprint from the hand of R. Hübner comprises pp. (43)-53. The language is Greek from the 1st century A.D. He wrote his analysis of the document in English and Greek. It is hard for me to comprehend that such a document can be read and analysed. Admirable!

In the last years of his life, he translated the Iliad (an important narrative of the Trojan War from the 8th century BC) into classical hexameters, purely out of interest in the text and the deep satisfaction of this work.

250 chess rubrics from the magazine Prisma

Prisma was a weekly television magazine that was and still is enclosed free of charge with some daily newspapers. At the time, it was mainly distributed in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Probably only a few people today still know that GM Robert Hübner contributed his chess expertise to this section from around 1977 to the beginning of 1985. His offer to the reader ranged from specific mating pictures to problems and positions from games. He often introduced his tasks with the sentence: 'An introduction to the situation'. The answer was sometimes printed in reverse so that the reader could first analyse the problem independently before reading his commentary.

After that, the lawyer and international master Mathias Gerusel took over this section.

Here is a 'sample' from the game Hübner : Unzicker 1984. By the way, this TV magazine is still included in the local Kassel daily newspaper today, albeit without a chess column.

Meran 1980/81

Before Meran 1980, he worked as a papyrologist at the University of Cologne. He gave up this academic work in favour of his preparation for the chess match against Victor Kortschnoi in Meran in 1980/81. The course of this chess match has been documented many times, and the reasons for GM R. Hübner's cancellation of the match have also been the subject of numerous opinions from a wide variety of perspectives.

In a SPIEGEL article from January 25, 1981, the Cologne native said the following about the reasons for his withdrawal: *“There is a complex of reasons for this. Some of them are of a private nature. Therefore, the subject is not suitable for public discussion.”*

And in the book by W. Harenberg (Schachweltmeister, Rowohlt TB 1981, p. 51) you can read how he initially contradicts and refutes 5 hypotheses and reasons that were claimed, discussed and disseminated in public about the competition, his team and his task. Furthermore:

“The real causes of the abandonment lie in the private sphere and are beyond public view; of course they are rooted in my own weaknesses.” (W. Harenberg, p. 52)

Finnish and other languages

Just an anecdote? The classical scholar played a game against the Finnish GM Heikki Westerinen. Hübner was unable to talk to the grandmaster after the duel because, according to tradition, he only spoke Finnish.

R. Hübner therefore learnt and studied Finnish so that he could chat to H. Westerinen in Finnish after the next match! Even though Hübner never boasted about his knowledge of the difficult language, there is at least one piece of evidence that the Cologne native had studied Finnish in depth: he was enthusiastic about the Finnish poet Olli, see bibliography at the end, and translated several of his works. ‘Olli was the pseudonym under which the Finn Väinö Nuorteva (1889-1967) published his humorous stories.’ (from the introductory remarks) The German reader can enjoy seventy-five satires. Yes, the volume also contains a satire entitled ‘Chess’. This contains an analysis with notations. It is hardly surprising that R. Hübner refers to this analysis - in a wonderfully ironic comment (p.109f), followed by his analysis with diagram, because he wanted to ‘understand’ the given ‘series of moves’: ‘What in this little story, the reader will ask, can cause difficulties in understanding? Everything is perfectly clear!’ Well, it is not a question of whether this unique case in world history of a chess analysis has really attracted attention ...’

His subtle irony can be read with pleasure in various other texts. Another example is his essay Emanuel Laskers Stilbegriff [Emanuel Lasker's concept of style], a lecture which he was originally due to give in Merano in October 2002, but which never materialised. It was then published in ChessBase Magazine 93 / April 2003 under the title ‘Abfall Nr. 55’. The lecture was reprinted in the Festschrift für Egbert Meissenburg (2009), pp. 296-305.

His irony and self-irony can also be read in the book title from 2015: 66 saftige Schnitzer begangen und besprochen von Robert Hübner [66 juicy blunders committed and discussed by Robert Hübner].

You would have to ask the GM Jan Timman to be able to say with greater certainty what is true. R. Hübner and Jan Timman were friends, but at the chessboard their games were all about winning. He was also unable to converse with Jan Timman in the analyses in Dutch after their early games. His conclusion was to learn this language as well.

Copyright on chess games

When R. Hübner wanted to enforce the players' © rights to their games, he was given a lecture:

Copyright law does not recognise works that are created by their producers working against each other.

Thousands of games played by him were the subject of the legal dispute. Expert opinions were drawn up by the DSB and GM Unzicker and in the end, as every chess player knows by now, his opinion was not honoured. Hübner's expert opinion is on display alongside other memorabilia in a special display case in the Löberitz Chess Museum.

Kornik 2007

The former librarian Maria Łuczak (1949-2011), who unfortunately has already passed away, reported on the II International von der Lasa Seminar in Kórnik 2007 under the title Z BADAN NAD HISTORIA I LITERATURA SZACHÓW II. MIEDZYNARODOWE SEMINARIUM HISTORYKÓW SZACHÓW 22 - 24 X 2007 [FROM RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY AND LITERATURE OF CHESS, II INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR OF CHESS HISTORIANS 22-24 October 2007] in Polish on pages 312-314. (<https://www.journals.pan.pl/dlibra/publication/130453/edition/113923/content>), 30.1.2025

„Trzeciego dnia wysłuchano kolejnych referatów, korzystano w czytelni z możliwości zamawiania dzieł z kolekcji szachowej, przyglądano się zmaganiom młodzieży kórnickiej z szachowej sekcji „Wieża” podczas symultany z arcymistrzem Hübnerem, zwiedzano zamek i obejrzano biblioteczne skarby z kolekcji Działyńskich i Zamoyskich.

Po wspólnej fotografii i pożegnalnej kolacji, po przemówieniach pełnych ciepłych słów pod adresem gospodarza imprezy – Biblioteki Kórnickiej – nastąpiło uroczyste zakończenie II. Międzynarodowego Seminarium Historyków Szachów.“

‘On the third day we listened to more lectures, took the opportunity to order works from the chess collection in the reading room, watched the fights of the Kórnik youth from the ‘Rook’ chess department during a simultaneous performance with grandmaster Robert Hübner, visited the castle and looked at the library treasures from the Działyński and Zamoyski collections.

After a group photo and a farewell dinner, after speeches full of warm words to the host of the event - the Kórnik Library - the ceremonial conclusion of the II International Seminar for Chess Historians took place.’



— Kórnik 2007, Simultan

against young people



— Polish champion Hanna

Erenska-Barlo with GM R. Hübner

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— Kórník 2007 Hübner-

Awerbakh, short game for the photographers

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— Tomasz Lissowski reported on Tartakower in

Poland in the summer of 1935

Doping controls in chess

Another 'element' of the Cologne native's life is his consistent stance against doping controls in chess. They are a degradation, incapacitation and disenfranchisement of the individual (ChessBase.com, 2008). As a result of the controls sought by FIDE, GM Hübner announced his resignation from the German national team.

Encounters in Cologne 2007 and elsewhere

A few things need to be said. R. Hübner was a friendly and obliging host. In the years that followed, e-mail exchanges and contacts were always and exclusively friendly in tone, always ready to respond to requests, chess and other content was categorised on the basis of his immense knowledge, also in his slightly ironic style and often 'hiding his light under a bushel'. Requests never went unanswered!

Mummy portraits

We know that the vast field of chess was not R. Hübner's sole and exclusive interest. In literature, he appreciated the poetry of the Czech poet Franz Kafka (1883-1924) as well as the German baroque poet Andreas Gryphius (1616-1664). We also know that he played the Chinese chess game Xiangqi and the Japanese game Go, both of which he mastered. We know of his activities as a translator and, above all, his in-depth analyses of chess games, which he carried out with scientific accuracy in the days before computers - he even analysed his own games self-critically! The book titles *Fünfundfünfzig feiste Fehler* [Fifty-five Foolish Mistakes] and *Twenty-five Annotated Games* bear witness to this.

We also owe our knowledge of this 'element' [see SCHUND in the bibliography] to the director of the Löberitz Chess Museum, Konrad Reiß. Robert Hübner had a special affinity for this place. R. Hübner copied Roman mummy portraits. He also practised this activity with great skill. He 'trained' in a nunnery in Switzerland. He painted with self-mixed colours and also used gold overlays. The three portraits give a good impression of this.

Photo: Konrad Reiß, Chess Museum Löberitz

We quote from the foreword to the book SCHUND and its introduction to reiterate the subtle irony and chess intentions of R. Hübner from 2021.

They met privately to play chess. The group was given the name SCHUND:

'**S**chachverband **un**verzagter **D**ilettanten [Chess Association of Undaunted Dilettantes]; the word

'dilettante' (from the Italian: dilettare 'to delight') is to be understood exclusively in the sense of 'enthusiast'.

His reference to the full-page prints of his painted mummy portraits at the end of the book is made in the foreword:

'Dieses Buch bedürfte keines Vorwortes, hätte nicht der Verfasser bei der Zusammenstellung einen bösen Fehler begangen. Er drückte eine falsche Taste auf seinem Rechner, und so gelangten einige Seiten in das Werkchen, die nichts darin zu suchen haben und in keinerlei Zusammenhang mit dem übrigen Inhalt stehen. Sie befinden sich am Ende des Bandes, so daß der Leser sie leicht überschlagen kann. Ich bitte, das Versehen zu entschuldigen.

[This book would not need a preface if the author had not made a nasty mistake in compiling it. He pressed a wrong key on his computer, and so some pages ended up in the little work that have no place in it and have no connection whatsoever with the rest of the contents. They are at the end of the volume so that the reader can easily skip them. I apologise for the oversight.]

Robert Hübner, Cologne, 1 April 2021'

This 'element' concludes this memoir, but not without expressing that I have many thanks to Robert Hübner, a man who did not chase fame and money, a modest, highly intelligent scientist with numerous other talents - as these 'elements' will hopefully show interested readers!

Selection of books and articles

[In an article from the ChessBase Magazine 11 and 12/1998 R. Hübner points out a shortcoming: 'Finally, I would like to draw attention to the serious lack of bibliographical aids in the field of chess literature, which is noticeable to anyone who wants to work in this field: he has to rely on his foggy memory and the random holdings of his own library when doing source research...']. The latter also applies to this memoir!

- M. van Fonderen; P. Kleine, Dr. Robert Hübner. 60 seiner schönsten Partien. Kleine Schachbücherei Vol. 11/12, Hollfeld: Beyer Verl., 2nd ed. and expanded ed. 1982
- Hübner, Robert, Olli. Fünfundsiebzig Satirchen. Selection, translation from Finnish and introduction by Robert Hübner, Hamburg: ChessBase 2003. The text with the commentary by R.H. first appeared in ChessBase Magazine 64, June 1998 under the title: Abfall Nr. 35: Schachnotation in der Literatur - zwei Rekonstruktionsaufgaben. It deals with Chr. Morgenstern, Max Frisch, S. Beckett and Olli = V. Nuorteva.
- Hübner, Robert, Materialien zu Fischers Partien, Schachzentrale Rattmann, Ludwigshafen 2004, 232 pp.
- Hübner, Robert et al. Kölner Papyri. Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Sonderreihe Papyrologica Coloniensia, Westdt. Verl. 1976. [in the magazine Gnomon - Schattenanzeiger, astron. Instrument - reviews by R.H. can be found between 1979 - 1999]
- Ders.; Oath of a Dike Oberser [Eid eines Deichaufsehers], in: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und

Epigraphik, Bonn : Rudolf Habelt Verl., ed. 1977, vol. 24, (43)-53, facsimile platel II.

- Ders.; Elemente einer Selbstbiographie, Berlin : Edition Marco, 1st ed. 2015, 145 pp.
- Ders.; SCHUND. Ein Schachbuch von Dilettanten für Dilettanten, Berlin : Edition Marco, 1st ed. 2021, 183 pp.
[after p. 176, four full-page mummy portraits are illustrated, with explanations of the painting technique, e.g. egg tempera and gold leaf on wood, as well as notes on the historical background]
- Ders.; Twenty-five Annotated Games, Berlin : Edition Marco, 1st ed. 1996, 416 pp.
[a review of the book was written by Stefan Löffler in the FAZ, 19.12.1996]
- Ders.; Fünfundfünfzig feiste Fehler, begangen und besprochen von Robert Hübner, Stamsried : Verlag Ernst Vögel, 1st ed. 1990, 111 pp.
[‘The search for mistakes is the essence of chess’, FAZ, 6.11.2008]
- Ders.; Der Weltmeisterschaftskampf Lasker - Steinitz 1894 und weitere Zweikämpfe Laskers, Berlin : Edition Marco, 1st ed. 2008, 235 pp.
- Ders.; Zu den Anfängen von Laskers Schachlaufbahn. In: R. Forster / St. Hansen / M. Negele, Emanuel Lasker. Denker. Weltbürger. Schachweltmeister, Berlin : Excelsior Verlag, 1st ed. 2009, chapter 18, p. 415-574.
- Ders.; Büsum 1968. Erinnerungen von Robert Hübner, Berlin 2018 : Edition Marco, 54 pp.

Siegfried Schönle, Kassel im Februar 2025

¹ The official date of death, January 4, 2025, contains a letter from the Cologne District Court dated February 11, 2025, file number: 33 IV 23/25. Death Registry Office Death Registry No.: Cologne Registry Office, S 568 /2025.