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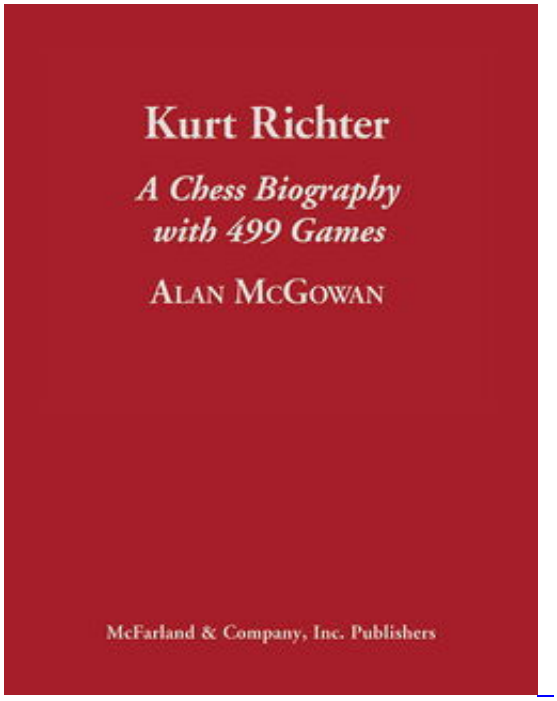
Homage to a chess master



by Michael Dombrowsky

It seems an irony of history that he of all people wrote a biography about Kurt Richter. I talk about Alan McGowan who has written the biography “Kurt Richter – A Chess Biography with 499 Games”. There are some differences between protagonist and author: The year the book comes on the market is the 50th anniversary of the day of death for Richter and the 65th birthday of the author.

And something else distinguished both: McGowan is born in Glasgow. He saw most of Scotland and the rest of Great Britain. When he was 34 years old he moved to Canada and saw a lot from North America. He still lives in Waterloo (Ontario), not far away from Toronto. Richter was born in Berlin (1900) and died in Berlin (1969). He hated it to travel. Inside Germany it was ok. But journeys over the border were very, very seldom. For playing chess Richter left Germany only three times. Once for the Chess Olympics 1931 at Prague, where he wins the bronze medal with 10,5 points out of 15 games (+7 =7 -1) at board four. The second time he played 1936 in an international tournament of Podebrady in Czechoslovakia (a small spa around 40 kilometers east of Prague), where he wins the ninth prize with 9 points out of 17 games (+5 =8 -4) behind Salo Flohr, Alexander Alekhine, Jan Foltys, Vasja Pirc, Gideon Stahlberg, Erich Eliskases, Paulin Frydman and Jiri Pelikan, but ahead of greats like Valdimirs Petrovs, Lajos Steiner or Karel Opocensky. And the third time was a match Germany – Hungary 1939 at Karlsbad, the city was after the German annexation part of the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moldavia” and belonged for six years to Germany. Kurt Richter wins both games against Geza Füster, who immigrates after WW II to Canada.

Why does a Scot, widely travelled and lived on two continents, write a book about a German chess master, who were most of his lifetime in Berlin? By chance!

When Alan McGowan was 13 years old, he got in Glasgow member of the Cathcard Chess Club, in those days one of the strongest Scottish clubs. His first (indirectly) contact he got when he found a book "Chess Olympiads" written by Arpad Földeak and published in 1966. The young Alan was fascinated by the combinations of Richter. Later in 1970 – he was 16, 17 years old – he played with a Scotch junior team a correspondence match against a junior team of Germany. From his opponent he got an advise of a book entitled "Kurt Richters beste Partien". Alan studied this book and was inspired. And his curiosity was aroused. But it took eight more years – after finishing school and the education at the police in Glasgow – that McGowan began to search who Kurt Richter had been.

Ian Marks, member of the same chess club, helped him very much because of his knowledge of the German language. To determine and find was Alans job. In the meantime he was member of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), where he daily has to find people, facts or proofs. The first step to seek more about Kurt Richter made McGowan in 1978. He wrote to Rudolf Teschner, an International Master, a German Champion and since 1950 Editor in Chief of the "Deutsche Schachzeitung". By the way: When Richter was asked to make this job, he refused and told the publisher that Teschner would be the right person. Both worked together over decades, the chief and the freelancer.

He got a lot of information and some addresses of interesting peoples. The most helpful source was Gerhard Richter, the younger brother (born 1903) of Kurt. They corresponded for years and McGowan got much information and a lot of documents, scoresheets and pictures. And with the possibility to use the Internet he reached much more Information and suggestions. The result of this tremendous lot of work over decades is a great book, neither because of his large size and the 368 pages volume, nor because of the excellent production of the publishing house McFarland. All these things are fantastic, but the most important thing of every book is an exciting told story full with information, which were unknown before. Alan McGowan shows that he is a pretty good investigator. He found out several games, which were never published. And besides the chess tables he described with great expertise the life after World War I, the Nazi period and the time after World War II, until the communists raised the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Alan McGowan presents an exceptionally fine book – but nobody is perfect. So he signed a large, intensive picture of the chess player, the busy journalist and the famous book author Richter, but the private human Kurt Paul Otto Josef Richter and his personal life remained mainly unanswered. In the first edition of "Kurt Richers beste Partien", published 1938, Alfred Brinkmann wrote in the introduction:

> "It is his (Richter's) express wish and correspond to my personal opinion, to abstain from all biographical details. The games will speak for themselves and let the image of the chess master grow up…".

Today Brinkmann's sentences sounding a bit mysterious. No one wrote a private story about Richter. So this hole in the book must not be Alan McGowan's fault. During my working as a journalist Investigation was a normal part of my job. I got often information for writing on the paper, but sometimes I heard things

only for save them in my brain.

For historical interested chess enthusiasts – special for Germany and Europe – the book is a must.

Alan Gowan Kurt Richter – A chess biography with 499 games (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers)
Price: € 69,50

More information:

- McFarland
- Google Books with limited preview
- Alan McGowan: Kurt Richter - A Chess Biography with 499 Games
- McGowan, Alan