

*A Chess-enthused Chemist Writes About a
Like-minded Member of the same Profession*

A Book Review by Dr. Ralf Jürgen Binnewirtz

Eva Regina Magacs, Michael Negele: *Paul Felix Schmidt – A Winning Formula*

Most chess friends will know negligibly little about the eventful life of German-Estonian chess master Paul Felix Schmidt (1916–1984, IM title 1951), who gave up competition chess for a career in industry as a chemist after his 1952 emigration to the USA. The new publication introduced herein promises thoroughgoing redress in regard to this widespread ignorance. But first things first...

A few days ago, when I held in my hands for the first time the brand new work of the above-mentioned writer duo, I was immediately taken with the excellent layout and design of the book. Handsomely cloth-bound in medium blue and inscribed with silver letters on the cover and spine, it is jacketed in an attractive dust cover, which speaks to the beholder with various photos, drawings, and informative blurbs (the latter exclusively in English). For the rest, the central biographical chapters are presented throughout bilingually in English/German.

The English part “A Winning Formula” (translated by Eva Regina Magacs) precedes the German part “Meisterhaftes aus der Retorte.” Here already is a foreshadowing of Schmidt’s professional career as a chemist. The next-to-last section of the book (before the index) contains a selection of twelve annotated Schmidt games; the comments come from contemporary, overwhelmingly German, chess magazines. (The old German spelling appears here for that reason.) The German commentary and associated English translations for the games are placed together consecutively, but differentiated by distinct typefaces. Actually the entire English text for the book uses a sans serif typeface, so that the reader, even by cursory observation of the text, can easily distinguish both languages.

Let me be permitted a short comment on the layout of the book. I probably ascribe a much higher significance to this aspect than most reviewers. The typographer and designer Ulrich Dirr, renowned in the German chess scene, has here done an exemplary job creating a balanced and harmonious presentation of text and illustrations. Thus the (generally superior) high quality of the book content – that can be herewith anticipated – has found an adequate equivalent in a high-quality layout. This should not only markedly promote the desire to read and enjoy the book, but increase the appeal for the collector to purchase the book.

In this context the opulent illustration, with numerous rare or hitherto unknown historical photos and documents, is especially to be noted. These illustrations are often of an

astoundingly high quality; Ulrich Dirr has invested substantial optimization efforts here. All the images are different in the English and German parts. No matter what their language preferences, readers should peruse the entire book in order to fully grasp and appreciate the illustrations.

In large part we must thank the daughter of Paul F. Schmidt, Eva Regina Magacs, whose family archives proved to be a real treasure box, that this rich stock of unique illustrations found entry into the book. The “miraculously” formed acquaintanceship of Michael Negele with the Magacs family in the USA has emerged as the most fateful stroke of luck in the course of the book project. Through the subsequently started collaboration, and with the information and pictures provided by Regina Magacs, the biography was raised to a new, previously unimaginable level.

Let us now turn to the purely biographical parts of the work. Here Michael Negele by no means confined himself to delivering a biography solely of the title figure. Rather, his elaborations begin (in the chapter “People and Destinies from Old Livonia”) with the great-grandfather of Paul Schmidt, Max Gustav Schmidt (1810–1874), who founded and directed a school for boys in the Livonian town of Fellin. The further bloodline up to Paul Schmidt, as well as individual luminaries in the extensive family, will not be discussed here in detail – the overwhelming abundance of the researched details is beyond the scope of this review.

At the same time the author is able to portray the political and social circumstances of the times through occasional historical digressions where it seems expedient. Many of the leading figures in chess, but also in science, named in the text are introduced in light gray highlighted boxes: a clever measure to avoid interrupting the flow of the main text. Certainly many readers will gladly draw on the family tree (p.129 in the book), which stretches over eight generations and, to my mind, constitutes an indispensable guide.

I do not want to withhold a further interesting finding: the above-mentioned school in Fellin also proved to be a nucleus of Livonian chess, from which renowned chess masters – I’ll mention only Friedrich Amelung and Viktor Knorre – emerged. Here also the grandfather of Paul Schmidt was infected with the chess virus – it transferred successfully from the latter’s son to the grandson. The chess tradition of the Schmidt family is thus revealed as stretching a long way back.

The facts recorded in the book contents are obviously based on painstaking, lengthy research. Among other things, several outstanding Baltic search engines on the Web have proven very helpful. As a further lucky occurrence it should be mentioned that in 2016, in Wijk aan Zee, Michael Negele made the acquaintance of the Estonian chess trainer Ervin Liebert. The latter has earned merit as a “most patient translator of Estonian sources” for the sake of the book.

The following three chapters, which illuminate in detail the life journey of Paul Schmidt, will here only be listed. Overall their contents seem to me too complex and involved to be amenable to a short synopsis:

- “A Fight for Supremacy (1916–1939) – Childhood and Youth Between Two Worlds”
- “Duel With a Friend (1940–1945) – Soldier of the Wehrmacht and Chess Master of Greater Germany”
- “Indistinguishable On 64 Squares (1946–1984) – Chess Master or Pioneer of Semiconductor Technology”

At this point the biographical account in the German part is complete, but in the English part there is still a segment from the pen of Regina Magacs. In “From Chess Board to Periodic Table – Dr. Schmidt Goes to America” the author recounts her personal memories and impressions since the emigration to the USA. Hence a family story “first hand,” which broadens the authenticity – something especially beneficial for a biography.

The chapter “Schmidt Documents and Family Tree” shows further photos as well as unique documents relating to the Schmidt family. The concluding appendix of the book offers a chart about Schmidt’s game and match results, as well as indices of the illustrations and of the people, places, and selected keywords.

As concerns the translation of the German chapters into English, Regina Magacs has executed this carefully and skillfully. Notably she has taken into account that the often complex compound sentences in the German text would fail to enchant an international readership. Therefore she has eliminated these structures to a large extent through the creation of shorter sentences, without changing the content. As far as a “non-native” speaker can judge, the task was mastered splendidly.

The omnipresent “goof-up gremlin” has not entirely spared this book. However, up to now only a few discrepancies have come to light:

- The chess player H. Elsas is consistently spelled as “Elsass.”
- A wrong footnote number (87 instead of 99) appears in the caption on p.196.
- On page 295, the page numbers for Schmidt’s version about Alekhine’s story are incorrect. The correct ones are p.248 (instead of p.284) and p.106 (instead of p.281).
- In the definitely ample index occasional discrepancies are to be found, which were evidently caused by displaced lines or pages.

For a work of this substance and scope, I consider the error rate to be extremely minor.

My conclusion: an excellently researched family saga is presented here, adorned with 185 in part one-of-a-kind images, and enriched through the personal descriptions of a family member. Together with the attractive layout and design, a fascinating publication has come about, for which I want to make a warm recommendation.

Translated from the German by Eva Regina Magacs.