

LASKER'S DIFFICULT JOURNEY AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY AND CHESS
PUBLICATIONS IN LASKER'S LIFE



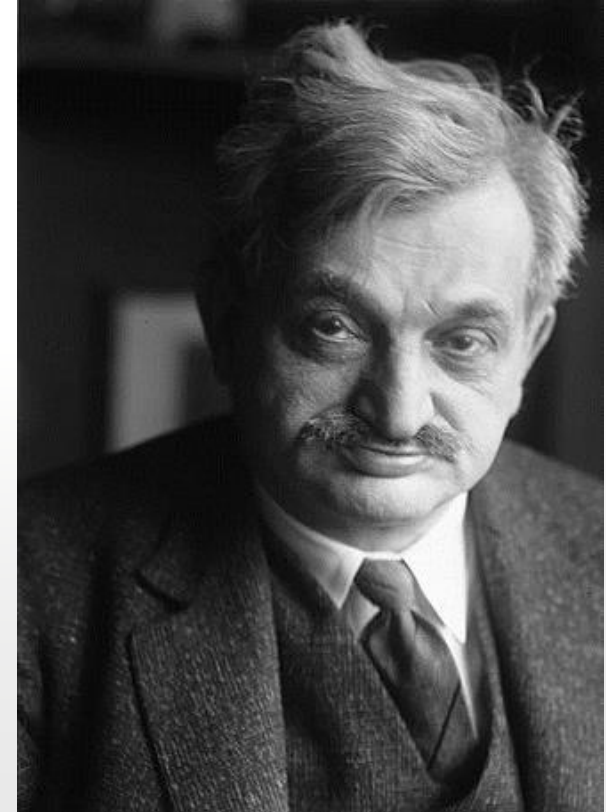
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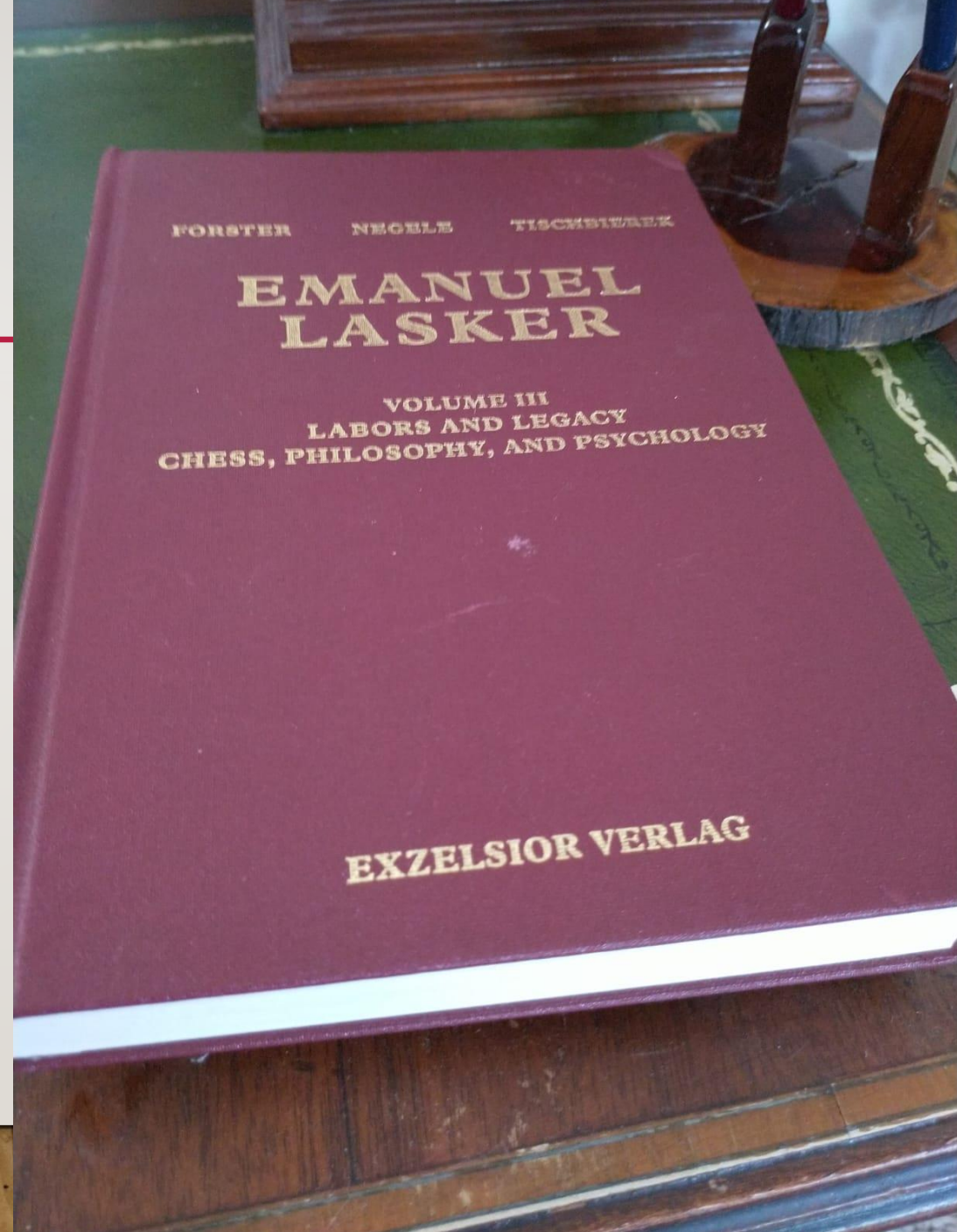
INTRODUCTION

- In St. Petersburg 1914, the reigning world champion Lasker won the super-tournament ahead of his closest rivals Capablanca and Alekhine; he thus confirmed his position as the best player of the world.
- After the first world war, he lost his title to Capablanca in Havana in 1921 and reduced his chess activities.



INTRODUCTION (II)

- What were the reasons?
- Third volume of the Lasker Trilogy offers some interesting thoughts:
 - His life was influenced by politics
 - He tried to impress in philosophy
 - He came back on the board occasionally and wrote his legacy in the 1926 *Lehrbuch*
- Additional material from Guy van Habberney



POLITICS: LASKER'S RETURN TO GERMANY

- Before the war, Lasker's chess career had started in the United Kingdom.
- After he became world champion he settled in the United States
- He returned to Germany in 1908, where he defended his title against Tarrasch (and against Schlechter 1910).



POLITICS (I): LIFE IN BERLIN

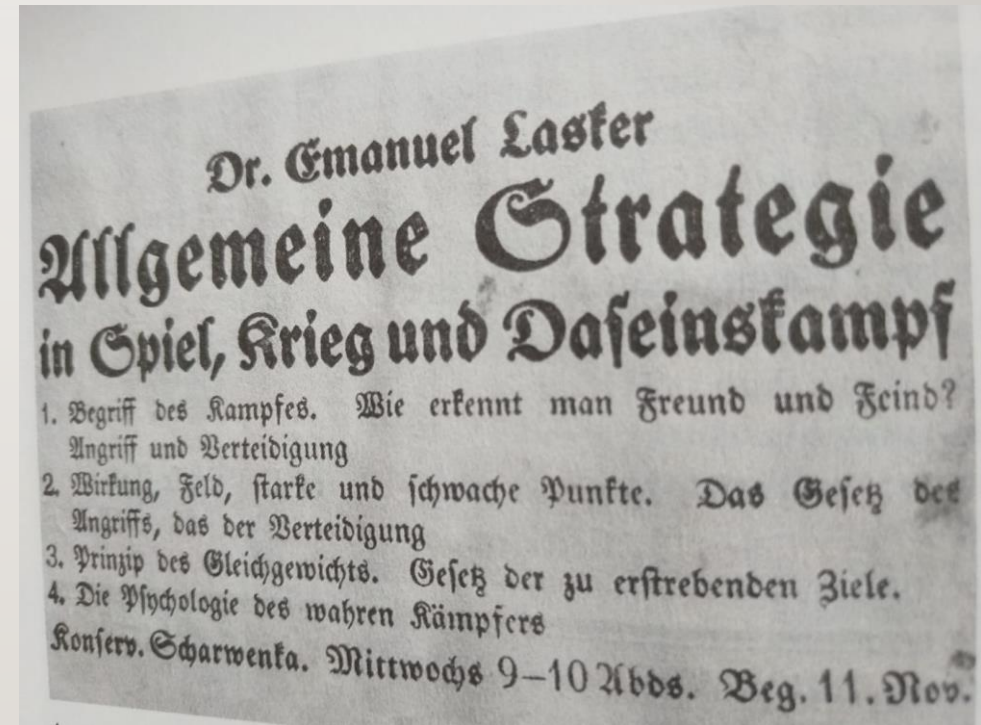
- When the war broke out in August 1914, he lived in well-situated circumstances in Berlin and possessed a „summer house“ in Thyrow (Villa Schmetterling).
- Lasker writes 10 articles and
 - displays optimism about German supremacy, winning the war
 - denigrates war opponents



POLITICS (II): HIS OPINION ON OTHER NATIONS

- England: „nation of businessman, looking for short-term profit only“; „easy to beat like in chess“
- France: Frenchman have an „esthetic ideal“ and are „brilliant“, but are endowed with little pragmatism and have built only little political progress
- Belgium: Germany's presence (occupation) will bring more roads hospitals and German civilisation to the country.

He holds holds lectures about the topic that will become central to his philisophy, namely the notion of „combat“ (Kampf)

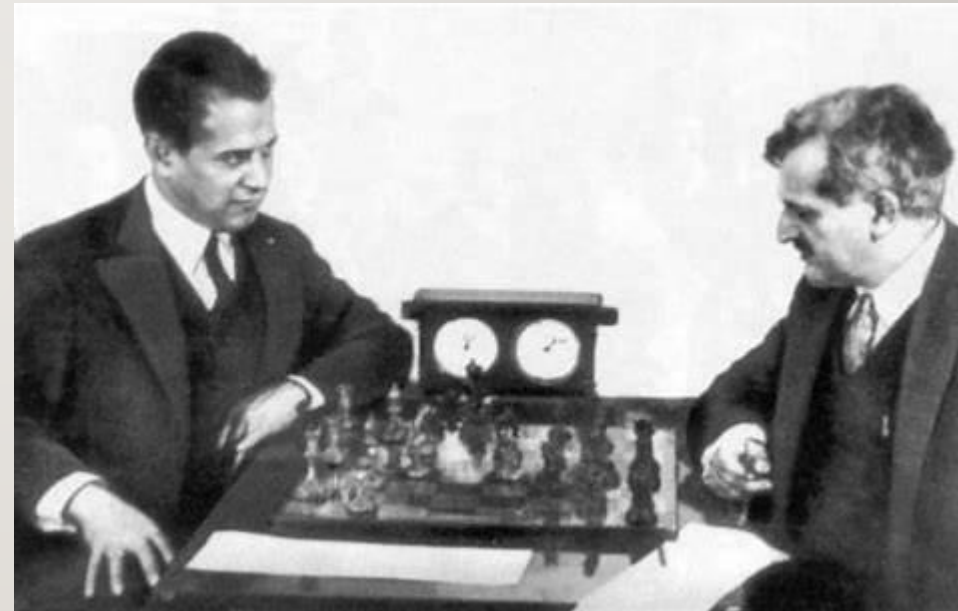


POLITICS (III): POST-WAR CONSEQUENCES

- Lasker's writings did not go unnoticed (*La Stratégie* 1915, special annex).

After the war,

- He was not invited to London 1919 or 1922
- He made a tour to the neutral countries Switzerland, Denmark and Holland, which became his second home.
- The United States initially denied a visa for his travel via New York to Havana for the world championship match in 1921 (US authorities claimed to have been still at war with Germany at the time). Only after intervention of a chess-playing chess secretary, the issue was resolved (but Lasker had found a different route by then).



POLITICS (IV): COMEBACK

- Tournament wins in Mährisch-Ostrau 1923 and in New York 1924 (but no invitation to New York 1927 because of the „clock incident“).
- Scored 2nd place in Moscow 1925 ahead of WC Capablanca
- Arbiter fo the Alekhine-Bogoljubow WC match 1929



POLITICS (V): DEPARTURE OF GERMANY

- In the 1930s, his life as respected chess master in Germany comes to his end; as liberal Jew he felt the growing anti-semitism for quite some time (letters to Edward Lasker 1917-1925) and needs to earn money.
- Lasker was often abroad already 1931 and 1932, and after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, he does not come back. Marta stays in Berlin, though. He finds refuge in Holland (1933) and UK (1934).
- He is less successful in Zurich 1934, and the Nazis confiscate his house in Thyrow.



POLITICS (VI): SETTLEMENT IN THE SOVIET UNION

- Turning point in 1935: Lasker scores third place in Moscow 1935 and receives invitation to settle in the Soviet Union with his wife
- Request goes from Justice Commissioner Krylenko to Stalin himself (March 1935)
- He also participates in Moscow 1936 and Nottingham 1936 (under Soviet flag), where he wishes to help Botvinnik.



POLITICS (VII): LIFE IN MOSCOW

- Life in Moscow is pleasant; he receives chess players in his house and writes the novel „How Wanja became a master“
- Contains the story of his life
- The book is though, not published in the Soviet Union : what happened?
- Let us first see a quote

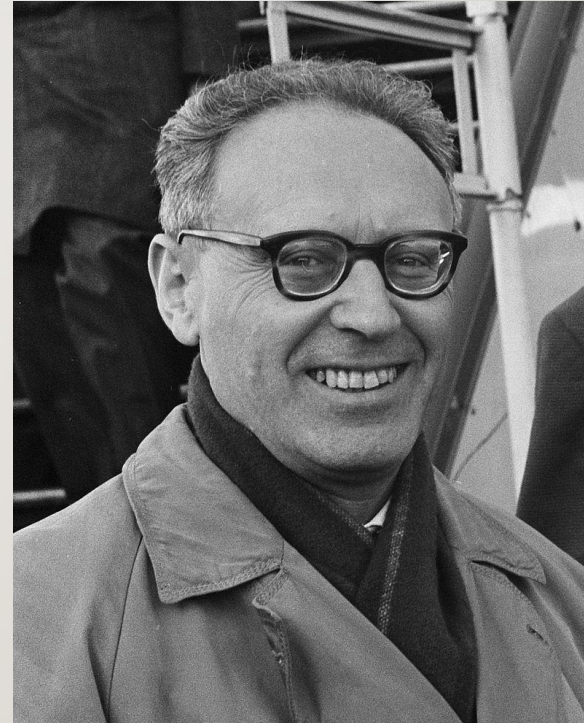


POLITICS (VIII): QUOTE FROM WANJA:

- *“Der Schachspieler, welcher einen Plan faßt, in dem den eigenen Figuren eine gewisse Aufgabe zufällt, während die feindlichen Figuren ihn stören“, erläuterte ich, „erhofft von jeder seiner Figuren einen ihr zufallenden Dienst und sieht die gegnerischen Figuren wie feindliche Mächte an. Der Kampf zweier Mächte gegeneinander ist zwar nicht das Leben selbst, aber die Essenz davon. Der Schutzengel des Menschen kämpft mit dessen Dämon, war ein vielgebrauchtes Bild.“*
- *„Ja, sagte Pedja, „aber noch zutreffender hat es Charles Darwin dargelegt. Der Kampf entwickelt Fähigkeiten, die schlafend waren oder ganz neu entstehen“.*
- *„Mit Euch Schachspielern“, sagte meine Frau tadelnd, „kann man einfach nicht reden. (...) Wenn ich mir ausmalen will, wie ein Mensch lebt und handelt, so lese ich die Biographie von Puschkin oder von Lenin oder von Napoleon oder einen guten Roman oder geh‘ ins Theater. Ihr Schachspieler sei ganz weltfremd so wie gute Kinder, die man an die Hand nehmen muß, wenn sie über die Straße gehen“.*
- E. Lasker, *Wie Wanja Meister wurde – Eine Erzählung aus der Schachwelt*, Exzelsior Verlag 2001, S. 70).

POLITICS (IX): DEPARTURE FROM MOSCOW

- At first sight, the quote is „politically correct“ (Darwin, Pushkin, Lenin, Napoleon non-suspicious)
- However, the Laskers left Moscow in October 1937 for the US, „to visit the granddaughter Lina Danelius“ in Chicgo – and never returned. He died in New York 1941.
- Unclear whether this was a political move (fearing persecution as being charged as a „spy“ –Voronkin; Krylenko himself became victim of the Stalinist repression)
- In any case, Botvinnik advised in 1938 against publication, alleging „typical bourgeois thinking“.

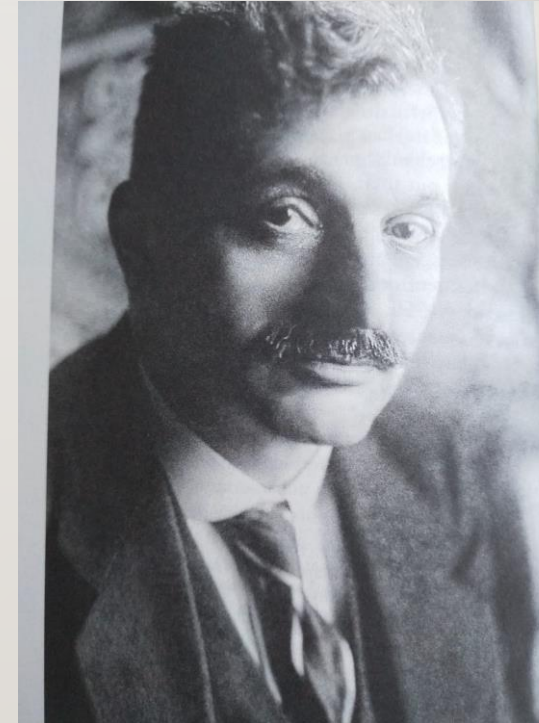


POLITICS (X): CONCLUSIONS

- Lasker „burnt his fingers“ when taking pro-German political positions in public 1914-1915.
- He was re-admitted into the Anglo-Saxon sphere in 1924 in New York and became again part of the chess world at large thereafter.
- After Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, Lasker lives as a de-facto refugee. He finds shelter in Holland (1933), UK (1934) and the Soviet Union (1935-1937) before turning to the US (1937-1941). Politics play a clear role in these choices.
- His own credo is not clearly defined, but can be discerned from his philosophical works written during this time, to which we now turn to.

PHILOSOPHY

- Despite his success as chess player and his dissertation in mathematics, Lasker thought of himself also as a philosopher.
- His aim was to achieve recognition far beyond his fame as a chess player.
- Next to his pamphle *Kampf* (1907), he published two systematic monographs (*Das Begreifen der Welt*, 1913 and *Die Philosophie des Unvollendbar*, 1919)



PHILOSOPHY (II): LASKER'S THEORY OF STRUGGLE (1907)

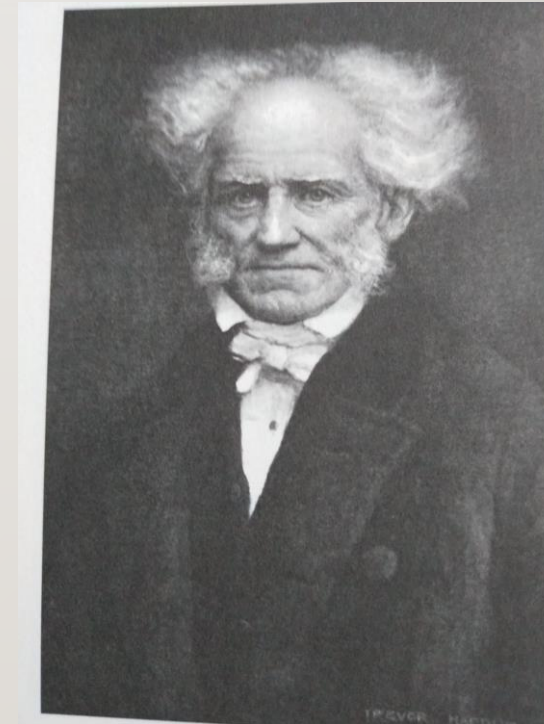
Probably inspired by Darwin („evolution is struggle for life“;

- Lasker asks: „What is struggle and victory? Do they obey laws that reason can comprehend and formulate?“
- He construes the ideal fighter, the „Macheide“ (reminds of homo economicus) who uses as rational decision criterion the expected utility
- Problem: Too many fields of „struggles“ with too high abstraction to find the „general rule“.



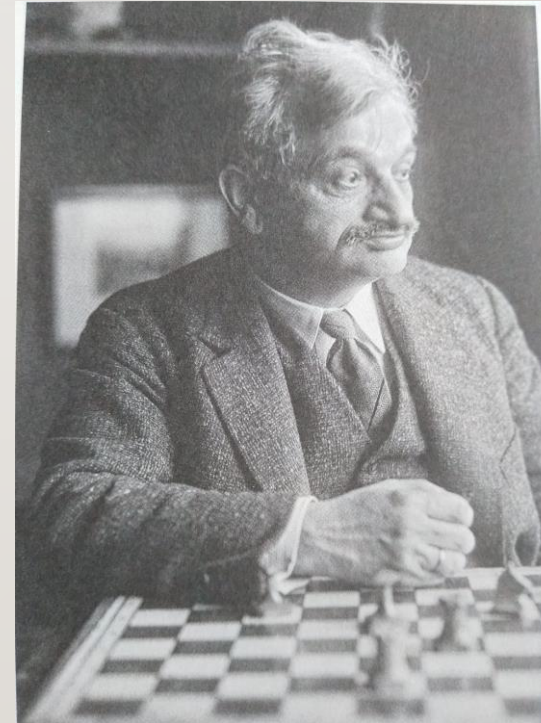
PHILOSOPHY (III): DAS BEGREIFEN DER WELT (1913)

- Inspired by Idealists, in particular Schopenhauer
- Divides the world in consciousness and representation (Descartes' „cogito ergo sum is complete – we need to know „what“ thinking is about)
- Difficult exercise between „ideas“ and „reality“ and definition of „causality“ as a „flow“ or „chain“ (several elements together)



PHILOSOPHY (IV): PHILOSOPHY DES UNVOLLENDBAR (1919)

- His „opus magnum“ (over 600 pages)
- Asks whether there are „border“ (Grenz-Gegenstände: The series $1, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{4}$ converges to 0, which is the border thereof); there are hence „completable“ and „uncompletable“ series.
- Transfers findings to philosophy, arguing that there exists an „axiom of Comprehension“.



PHILOSOPHY (V): CONCLUSION

- Lasker's philosophical writings were too abstract and guided by the idea to find an all-encompassing „axiom“. He wanted to unify concepts which were hard to bring together in the world of the early 20th century (Sprenger/Baldauf, p. 221)
- He was not connected to the academic world, and ignored too many authorities.
- The maximum recognition was that the „Philosophie“ was once subject to a seminar at the University of Marburg. Otherwise, there was no reception.
- As a self-taught philosopher, Lasker failed in this discipline, which probably hurt him deep inside.

CHESS TEACHINGS

- Already in 1896 Lasker published his „Common Sense in Chess“. It was well received (and translated in French in the Belgian Chess Magazine „Revue d'échecs“ 1901-1902“ (!)
- He edited his own chess magazine (1904-1909) in the US, and wrote a tournament book (St. Petersburg 1909).

Revue d'échecs
Organe du Cercle des Echecs de Bruxelles
Belgique : 4 fr. par an Pays étrangers : 5 fr.

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CHESS TEACHINGS (II)

- In 1925, an expanded version of his „Common Sense“ appears in German.
- His main work, the „Lehrbuch des Schachspiels“, follows in 1926.
- It is a unique contribution as it explains Lasker's approach to chess in a comprehensive way.
- He puts an emphasis on „independent and critical thinking“



CHESS TEACHINGS (III):THE OPENING

- Pawn moves must be effective („there are many pawn moves that really are not effective. Distrust a pawn move, examine carefully its balance sheet“).
- Develop knights before bishops
- Try to dominate space and central squares.
- Refutes the Evans Gambit (Chigorin's pet opening) with 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. b4 Bxb4 5. c3 Ba5 6. O-O d6 7. d4 Bb6 (St. Petersburg 1895/1896)



CHESS TEACHINGS (IV): COMBINATIONAL PLAY

- Famously, Richard Réti, alleged the „psychological style“ of Lasker, who would „bewitch“ his opponents.
- In my view, Lasker was very resourceful in tactical play, changing the dynamics of the position.
- In the *Lehrbuch*, he explains the „patterns“ of different combinations, including a new form: „the Desperado“ (used 1908 against Tarrasch).



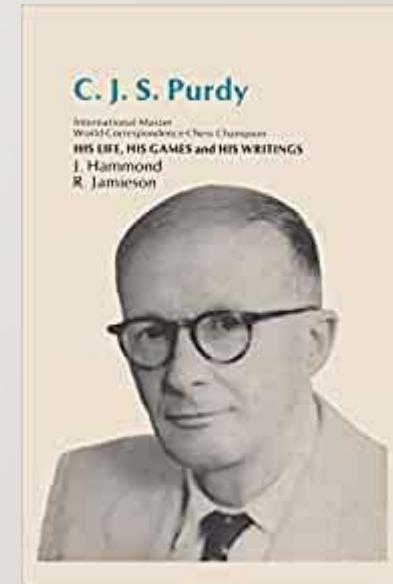
CHESS TEACHINGS (V): POSITIONAL PLAY

- The „jewel“ of the book (Botvinnik) was the chapter on positional play.
- Lasker gives a series of practical examples how to exploit weaknesses, play against „bad“ pieces, make use of pawn majorities etc.
- The most controversial, though, is assessment on the historical development, as he as considered Steinitz to be the founder of the positional school, „a thinker worth of a seat in the halls of a university“.



CHESS TEACHINGS (VI): THE STEINITZ HOAX

- Already Cecil Purday criticised the issue („The Great Steinitz Hoax)
- There was no comprehensive theory from Steinitz, just the „Modern Chess Instructor on openings, plus numerous commentated games (in the Field and his own Magazine)
- According to Purdy, in reality, Lasker had formulated most of the principles himself and attributed them to Steinitz as a sign of acknowledgment and even guilt towards the Bohemian Caesar.



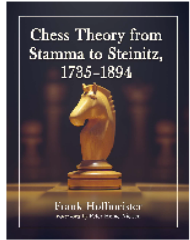
CHESS TEACHINGS (VII): POSITIONAL PLAY BEFORE STEINITZ

- In my own analysis, Purdy's critique is too harsh. Steinitz formulated a lot of positional principles in his commentaries and even spoke about the „new school“ in his Modern Chess Instructor (as opposed to the „old school“ (of Anderssen, Morphy, Zukertort and Chigorin).
- However, both Steinitz and Lasker greatly under-represented the positional progress made by Staunton, Harrwitz, Anderssen (!), Paulsen and Neumann between 1840-1870.
- Moreover, Chigorin was much more versatile than just „romantic“ – e.g. the King's Indian Attack against the French and the Chigorin Defense in the Ruy Lopez are extremely solid concepts. Like Winawer, he even produced a couple of „hyper-modern“ middle games.

EUROSPAN NEW TITLE

Chess Theory from Stamma to Steinitz, 1735-1894

Frank Hoffmeister
Foreword by Peter Heine Nielsen



Most chess biographies present the games of famous players, but not their writings. Filling that gap, this book begins with Syrian master and author of chess studies, Philip Stamma, and finishes with the first world champion Wilhelm Steinitz. The main novelties in opening, middlegame and endgame theory in the 160 year period are examined and biographical sketches put the contributions of more than 30 masters into context. The author presents many new insights - for example, regarding the origins of the Ponziani Opening, the Dutch Defense and the Petroff Defense. French star La Bourdonnais used other sources for almost every part of his *Nouveau Traité*. Morphy's analysis of the Philidor Defense was faulty and Anderssen's play included many positional ideas. Harrwitz and Neumann published modern treatises long before Steinitz came out with his *Modern Chess Instructor*. Many ending themes belong to less well-known authors, such as Cozio, Chapais, van Zuylen van Nyevelt, Sarratt, Kling and Horwitz, Berger and Salvio.

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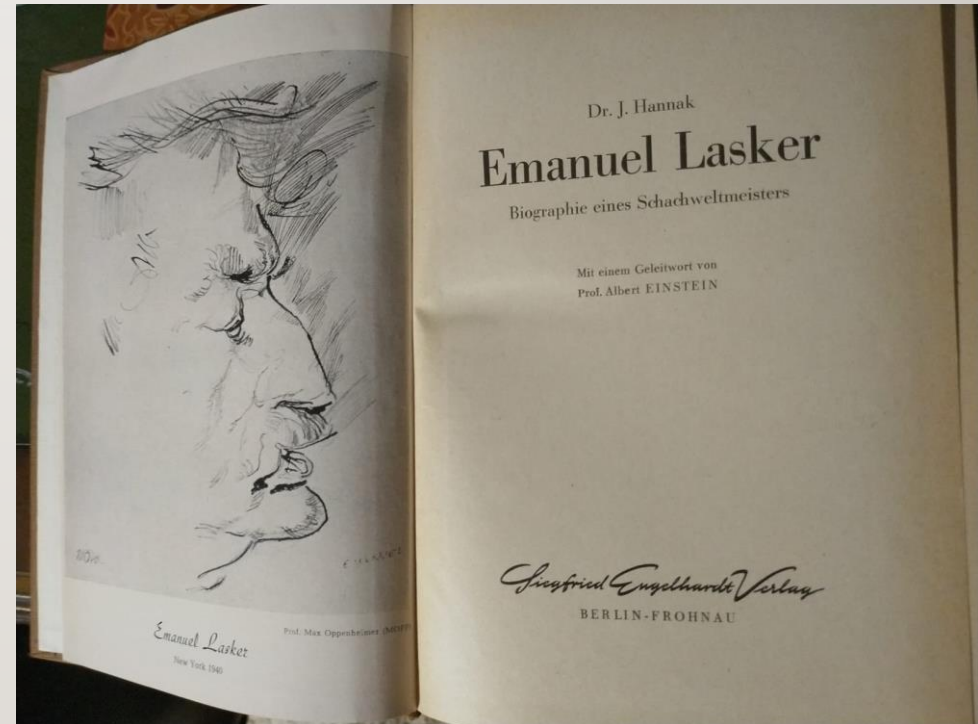
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CHESS TEACHINGS (VIII): CONCLUSIONS

- Lasker writes in a clear and approachable manner
- The book presents and attempt to also include his philosophical thoughts on „struggle“ by formulating the „rules“.As a teacher, he is closer to his opponent Tarrasch than usually assumed, but less „dogmatic“.
- The chess content is useful and up-to-date. His view on „chess history“, though, is incomplete.
- By putting Steinitz „on the positional throne“, he implicitly also defines his own place in chess history, as only a stronger player could „dethrone“ Steinitz, following the „universal rules“ of struggle. This underestimates, of course, other factors, such as age, health, motivation, emotions.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

- Politics influenced Lasker's life significantly. He felt the consequences of his nationalist writings during the first world war, fled Germany in the 1930s, found a rather short-lived shelter in the Soviet Union 1935-1937 and died in the United States.
- As philosopher, Lasker failed. His writings were too cumbersome for popular reading and too self-taught to make it into the academic world
- His chess teachings stand out in quality and originality, while his Steinitz theory does not withstand modern scrutiny.



OVERALL CONCLUSIONS (II): EINSTEIN ON LASKER

- All in all, Lasker was probably the most intellectual and versatile of all world chess champions. Who else would have Albert Einstein to dedicate a foreword to his biography?
- Einstein wrote: *„Emmanuel Lasker war ohne Zweifel einer der interessantesten Menschen, die ich in meinen späteren Jahren kennengelernt habe. (...) Für mich hatte diese Persönlichkeit trotz ihrer im Grunde lebensbejahenden Einstellung eine tragische Note. Die ungeheure geistige Spannkraft, ohne welche keiner ein Schachspieler sein kann, war so mit dem Schachspiel verwoben, daß er den Geist dieses Spieles nie ganz loswerden konnte, auch wenn er sich mit philosophischen und menschlichen Problemen beschäftigte“* (Hannak, Emanuel Lasker, p. 3)
- Maybe, we can agree with him!



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