

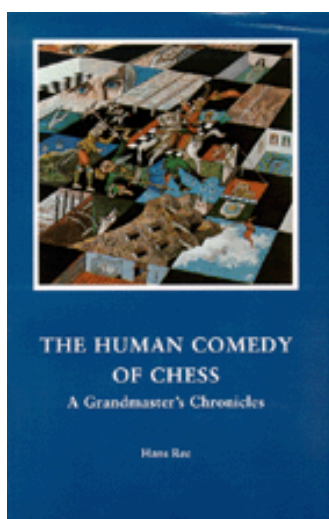


C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

The Human Comedy of Chess



by Hans Ree

Menashe

A small book that appeared in 2001 at the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Amsterdam chess café *Gambiet* had the title *Eerste indruk: rechtsomkeert*, which can be translated as First Impression: Turn Around and Leave. And indeed, the premises of Gambiet are far from the splendors of the Café de la Régence, where Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau played chess, or Simpson's Divan. Through the years the walls of Gambiet have turned from white to yellow to brown and the furniture is ramshackle, but the music is classical and chess is played there with passion and often with great expertise, for many masters are regular visitors.

It took me some effort not to write the preceding lines in the past tense, so connected is Gambiet with its owner and founder Menashe Goldberg, who died on Friday January 7.

He was born in 1939 in Poland, which was not a good time and place for a Jewish child to be born. Recently I learned from his friend Yochanan Afek, who is an Israeli citizen but lives in Amsterdam, how Menashe survived the war. The Germans had worked out a scheme to exchange prisoners. In Palestine, which at that time was under British Mandate, lived a few hundred German colonists - not Jews but Christians -, who had become enemy citizens under British rule. They were to be exchanged for Jews from the countries under German occupation. This way Menashe arrived in 1942 in what was to become the state of Israel, together with his mother and an older brother. His father had already been murdered in Poland by German troops.

During the sixties he settled in Amsterdam, where he came more or less by accident. The Israeli computer company for which he worked had told him to take a leave for some period, to restore tranquility at the firm. With a few friends Menashe went by boat to Cyprus. Maybe these friends also came to prefer tranquility. Anyway, Menashe went on alone to Amsterdam, where he knew a friend.

He stayed in the Netherlands, found a new job at a computer company and didn't like it. Chess was his great passion and in 1981 he opened his chess café at Bloemgracht. This is in the heart of old Amsterdam, in the quarter called Jordaan, close to the Anne Frank museum and the Westerkerk, Amsterdam's biggest and most famous church. In another jubilee booklet, produced in 1991, it was calculated that during the first ten years he must have played some 30.000 games in his café.

These jubilee booklets show that since the days of Voltaire and Diderot the connection between the chess café and literature has been preserved, for they contain contributions from poets and literary translators who are quite prominent in the Netherlands. As far as I know Menashe himself wrote only one article in his life, which started with the sentence: “I was just sitting down at the board, comes the famous swindler Rolf Schreuder and says: ‘Side bet?’”

It is a strong sentence that suggest that he should have written more often. Significantly, the article was in English, after he had been living in Amsterdam for more than thirty years. For Menashe, integration in society was something the Dutch cheese-heads should do at his place, not the other way around.

He liked to talk about “Gambiet atmosphere” and “the family” of Gambiet and he was a loving but stern family father, who considered quarreling to be the royal way to a candid human relation.

Since his youth his health had been bad. He had a heart problem and long ago he had been told by doctors that he would only reach the age of fifty, which in fact he exceeded by fifteen years. In 2001 a speaker at the celebration of the café's twentieth anniversary said that Menashe, by cleverly delegating all workaday routines, had managed to reduce his own duties to practically nothing: “To reduce life to drinking, smoking and chess, truly a unique accomplishment.” At a celebration party this may sound nicer than it is in real life.

Till the end of his life Menashe kept playing chess; in his own café, in the Senior Championship of the Amsterdam Chess Federation and in opens abroad, most often at the islands Jersey and Guernsey.

But it was becoming more and more difficult for him and with his deteriorating health he became ever more combative. After descending from his living quarters above the café he used to do the rounds along the chess tables, insulting all clients in turn, hoping for a row to produce the adrenaline that would make him feel still partly alive. “They learn that at the hotel school,” said a customer at one such occasion. “A good host visits all the tables and has a personal word for all guests.” Menashe could be combative, but his customers were not shy with words either.

Even those who had been given a life-long interdiction to visit his café were present at Menashe's funeral. There was much talk about the uncertain future of the only real chess café in Amsterdam. And the famous Open Championship of Jordaan, that was held there every year, would that survive? Let's hope for the best.

Menashe Goldberg • Alan Quant, Saint Helier Open, Jersey 1997

1. e2•e4 c7•c5 2. Nb1•c3 d7•d6 3. f2•f4 a7•a6 4. Ng1•f3 Nb8•c6 5. Bf1•c4 e7•e6 6. a2•a3 Bf8•e7 7. 0•0 b7•b5 8. Bc4•a2 Qd8•c7 9. d2•d3 Ng8•f6 10. Bc1•d2 0•0 11. Ra1•c1 Bc8•b7 12. Qd1•e1 Rf8•e8 13. Qe1•g3 Be7•f8 14. f4•f5 With simple and natural attacking moves White has already obtained a clear advantage.

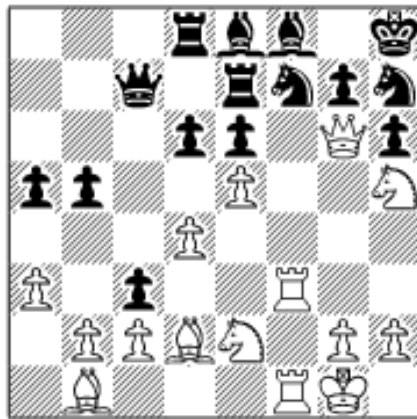
14...Nc6•d8 15. f5xe6 f7xe6 16. Nf3•g5 Kg8•h8 17. Qg3•h4 h7•h6 18. Ng5•h3 Nf6•h7 19. Qh4•h5 Re8•e7 20. Nh3•f4 Kh8•g8 21. Qh5•g6 Here White could

have gained a decisive material advantage by 21. Ncd5 exd5 22. Nxd5 Bxd5 23. Qxd5+, winning Black's rook. However not much is lost by missing this chance, for Black will not be able to withstand White's methodical build-up of forces against the king.

21...c5•c4 22. Nf4•h5 Kg8•h8 23. Rf1•f3 Nd8•f7 24. d3•d4 Bb7•c6 25. Rc1•f1 Bc6•e8 26. Ba2•b1 Preparing to have his bishop join the attack.

26...Ra8•d8 27. Nc3•e2 a6•a5 The only way to avoid the decisive intervention of White's bishop was 27...e5, though Black would be lost anyway.

28. e4•e5 c4•c3



29. Ne2xc3 d6xe5 30. Nc3xb5 Be8xb5 31. c2•c4 Now that White's bishop is freed Black will be mated within a few moves.

31...Nf7•g5 32. Bd2xg5 Nh7•f6 33. Nh5xf6 g7xf6 34. Bg5xf6+ Black resigned.

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