



**BOOK
REVIEWS**

When Chess Historians Meet

John S. Hilbert

“We came here because we love chess.”

Dr. Andrzej Filipowicz, Vice-President of the Polish Chess Federation

Proceedings of International Conference of Chess Historians, p.9

Proceedings of International Conference of Chess Historians, Edited by Vlastimil Fiala and Stanislaw Sierpowski (Publishing House Moravian Chess 2003), 286 pp., Retail Price: \$ 39.00

Chess tournaments drawing national and international fields are, relatively speaking, commonplace today. Over 150 years ago, however, such events were not only unusual, but in truth unique, until London 1851 had been followed, in time, by Manchester 1857, New York 1857, Cambridge 1860, and so on.

International gatherings of chess historians, even today, have been about as common as international chess tournaments were 150 years ago. The latest such gathering took place at Kórnik Castle, located twenty kilometers south of Poznan, Poland, September 16-18, 2002. Perhaps no better location could have been found for an international gathering of chess historians, for Kórnik Castle, besides housing the Kórnik Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences, houses the great chess book and manuscript collection of Baron Tassilo von Heydebrand und der Lasa, better known today as von der Lasa, a leading chessplayer and chess historian of the nineteenth century.

The castle at Kórnik is beautiful, surrounded by a medieval moat and established in the early sixteenth century by the Gorka family. In 1826 Tytus Adam Dzialynski became the owner of the property, and it was he who renovated the structure into its current form. Dzialynski had wanted a building to house his own library collection, and at the same time he wanted the building holding it to reflect some of the grandeur of an earlier time in the nation's history. In 1924 Kórnik Castle became the property of the Polish nation. It now houses a museum and library, and the park surrounding the castle is itself a scientific research area.

In September 2002 over twenty chess historians from around the world gathered at Kórnik for three days devoted to the history of our game and, by and large, to von der Lasa's contribution to it. Ten nations were represented in the mix of historians who presented materials at the conference, with eight Polish historians leading the way, as hosts, followed by five German scholars, and one or more participants from Russia, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States rounding out the group. Truly this conference was an international enterprise,



one that has now been memorialized in the volume under review here, *Proceedings of International Conference of Chess Historians*.

Proceedings is edited by Dr. Vlastimil Fiala and Dr. Stanislaw Sierpowski. The former is a Czech chess historian and publisher of Publishing House Moravian Chess, the publisher of this volume and dozens if not hundreds of historical reprints of famous and not-so-famous chess periodicals and the like. The latter is the Director of the Kórnik Library. Both editors have made interesting and useful contributions to this work.

Readers of *Proceedings* will find a text running 286 pages, with contributions in three languages. Approximately 150 pages are in English, another 110 in German, and the remaining 20 or so in Polish. While the central focus is on von der Lasa, his life and contributions to chess and chess history, the work is not exclusively devoted to the Baron. A paper presented by Grandmaster Yuri Averbakh, who attended the conference, on the chess poetry and prose of Vida, Rabelais, and Kochanowski, appears in English at pages 17-25. A more general paper entitled "Modern Problems of Chess Historians," by Hungarian chess historians Iván Bottlik and Györgo Blahó, also in English, appears at pages 36-39. And the contribution by Dr. Tadeusz Wolsza, the one essay in the volume appearing in Polish, a piece the title of which roughly translates into "Sources for Polish Chess History, Through 1945," offers a detailed list of pre-World War II newspaper chess columns, chess journals, and sources for chess-related drawings and photographs. According to Tomasz Lissowski, a leading Polish chess historian who also attended the conference, Professor Wolsza, who took his degrees in history at Wroclaw University, and who is by profession rather than merely avocation a historian, has given in this essay a crucial source list for anyone interested in exploring the earlier chess history of Poland, based on his twenty years of efforts in the field. The author of the multi-volume *Slownik biograficzny scachistow polskich* (A Biographical Dictionary of Polish Chess Players), a fourth volume of which is soon to be released, Dr. Wolsza's contribution to modern Polish chess history has been enormous. While these essays and several others are not related to von der Lasa or his contributions to chess history, they form a nice addition to this international collection of chess history writing.

The heart of the volume, however, is on von der Lasa himself. Born on October 17, 1818, von der Lasa was the son of an aristocratic Prussian family. While his father had chosen a military path, he chose a diplomatic one, finding himself attached to numerous embassies and the like in various parts of the world from 1845 until his retirement thirty-five years later, in 1880, when he could fully devote himself to his passion for chess and its history. Von der Lasa is remembered today among lovers of chess more for his extensive work in the history of the game and for his work on what eventually became the monumental *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, although in the 1840s and 1850s he was one of the strongest players in the world. Players of the likes of Löwenthal, Staunton, and Anderssen learned to respect von der Lasa's ability at the chessboard, and it is only because von der Lasa's extensive contributions to chess history, chess writing and chess book collecting in the last decades of his life overshadowed, and in truth outlived, his games, that his practical ability as a player early in life was largely forgotten shortly after his death.

A very interesting essay presented in *Proceedings* is by Ms. Maria Luczak of the Kórnik Library. While the piece is written in German, the most important element of the work is a listing of von der Lasa's chess letters present in the

collection. Future chess historians will, it is hoped, make good use of an extensive array of materials noted in Ms. Luczak's piece. A few of von der Lasa's correspondents, and the number of their letters in the collection, are as follows: Adolf Anderssen, 8 letters; Mikhail Chigorin, 46 letters; E.B. Cook, the American problemist and collector, 46 letters; Charles A. Gilberg, 17 letters; Carl Freidrich von Jaenisch, 146 (!) letters; Emil Schallopp, 19 letters; and Carl Walbrodt, 6 letters. Much of the other correspondence in the collection obviously has great value for students of chess history as well, and other items, fewer in number than the above, but certainly no less interesting to examine, includes letters by Gossip, Hoffer, Horwitz, Max Lange, Löwenthal, Staunton, Steinitz and Tarrasch.

Those who presented papers at the Kórnik Conference also had time to explore materials from the collection. And several of them, either before or during the conference, made good use of their opportunity to examine the von der Lasa correspondence. Polish chess historian Tomasz Lissowski, the author of books on Zukertort and Kieseritzky, had the opportunity to work with 14 letters from Lionel Kieseritzky to von der Lasa, written between December 3, 1840, and August 11, 1852. His findings are presented in a short German language article simply entitled "Kieseritzky und der Lasa" (pages 148-151, the last page offering a facsimile of the final 1852 letter). The 1852 letter was particularly poignant, as it clearly foreshadowed the decline of Kieseritzky and more generally chess in Paris that year. Kieseritzky lamented that the costs of producing a French language version of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels* would be prohibitive, even though he had planned on producing one for years, that the magazine *La Régence* had suspended publication, and that the building that once housed the Café de la Régence was to be torn down. Nine months later, deprived of his income as a journalist, deprived of the haunts of a happier day, Kieseritzky himself was dead.

Tomasz Lissowski was not the only person to make good use of the von der Lasa correspondence collection. The late Kenneth Whyld, who also participated at Kórnik, provided the volume with an extensive selection of the correspondence exchanged between von der Lasa and John G. White, the American lawyer and chess collector whose extraordinary endeavors form the heart of the world's largest collection of chess-related materials, now housed at the Cleveland Public Library. Readers may well find the exchange of ideas and knowledge between these two giants of nineteenth century chess history and collecting fascinating to peruse. Whyld's "The White-Lasa Papers" appears at pages 245-265.

Not only von der Lasa's letters and chess history achievements are recorded in the volume, but some of his earliest chess experiences are as well. Obviously chessplayers, even chessplayers with an interest in historical works on the game, love to find chess games to play over. And they will find them here. A quick review of some mega-databases suggests that students of the game today have easy access to perhaps 35 to 45 of von der Lasa's games, all played from 1838 on. The Kórnik Library houses an item with the nondescript label of *Varia*, Item No. 3091/2. That item in fact turns out to be von der Lasa's games manuscript, "in which the German baron registered the majority of his games played between 1836 and 1843" (page 50). Dr. Vastimil Fiala, in his lengthy essay in the volume detailing von der Lasa's chess playing career, provides 176 game entries for von der Lasa played between October 1836 and December 28, 1837, while von der Lasa was a student in Berlin. I have been careful to call these "game entries," because a number of the entries are not really games at all, but rather merely a few

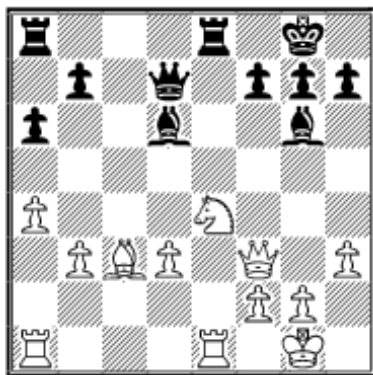
opening moves, some offering as few as the first three. For instance, the entire entry for game number 18 is “von der Lasa – P.R. Bilguer, Berlin, Oct. 17, 1837, 1.d4 f5 2.c4 Nf6 3.Nc3 etc. [1-0], Manuscript” (page 67). However, it would be wrong to leave the impression that the majority of the game entries are such pointless fragments. The vast majority are full games, and they occupy pages 62-106 of the book. By publishing von der Lasa’s games from this very early period, Fiala has quietly, and easily, tripled the number of von der Lasa games readily available to students of chess history. Here, for example, is a very early specimen, against one of von der Lasa’s frequent opponents. The game is the second listed in the book:

Von der Lasa - Seligo

[C55]

Berlin 1836

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Nc3 a6 5.Ng5 d5 6.Bxd5 Nxd5 7.Nxd5 Nd4 8.d3 c6 9.c3 cxd5 10.cxd4 Qa5+ 11.Bd2 Qb5 12.Bc3 dxe4 13.Nxe4 exd4 14.Bxd4 Bb4+ 15.Bc3 0–0 16.0–0 Bf5 17.Qf3 Be7 18.Rfe1 Bg6 19.a4 Qd7 20.b3 Rfe8 21.h3 Bd6



22.Nf6+ gxf6 23.Qxf6 Be5 24.Rxe5 Re6 25.Rxe6 fxe6 26.Qh8+ Kf7 27.Qxa8 Qd5 28.b4 Ke7 29.Bg7 Be8 30.Qc8 Bc6 31.Qc7+ Ke8 32.Qg3 Qb3 33.Qd6 Qd5 34.Qxd5 exd5 35.a5 Bd7 36.g4 Kf7 37.Be5 h5 38.f3 Kg6 39.Kh2 Kg5 40.f4+ Kh4 41.Bf6 mate 1–0

Proceedings of International Conference of Chess Historians, pp.62-63

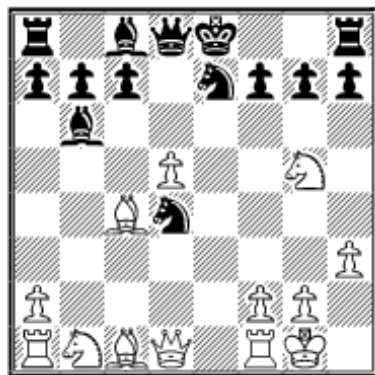
Here is another example, this one played against the unfortunate Paul Rudolf von Bilguer (1815-1840), who died five days before his twenty-fifth birthday. Bilguer was one of the seven Berlin Pleiades, and the original editor of the first edition of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, although he in fact died several years before it appeared in 1843. Von der Lasa edited the next four editions of the work, through 1873, always keeping his friend Bilguer’s name on the title page.

von der Lasa - Bilguer

[C51]

Berlin, October 15, 1837

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.b4 Bxb4 5.c3 Bc5 6.0–0 d6 7.d4 exd4 8.cxd4 Bb6 9.h3 Nge7 10.Ng5 d5 11.exd5 Nxd4



12.d6 Qxd6 13.Bxf7+ Kf8 14.Be3 Qf6
 15.Re1 c5 16.Qa4 Bxh3 17.Nxh3 Kxf7
 18.Qc4+ Kg6 19.Nc3 Ndf5 20.Ne4 Qc6
 21.Nxc5 Bxc5 22.Bxc5 1-0

*Proceedings of International Conference
 of Chess Historians*, p.67

Both games, of course, were originally taken from von der Lasa's manuscript. It can only be hoped that Vlastimil Fiala will continue to publish, perhaps in his *Quarterly for Chess History*, additional von der Lasa games from this source. The ones that appear in *Proceedings*, however, make a very good start to a fine collection of von der Lasa games, and will be of great interest to collectors of historical chess encounters.

There are, unfortunately, problems in this volume, and the reader should be aware of them before deciding whether to obtain it. While not a flaw, the book obviously will be of most interest to those who can read both English and German. Those who cannot read both languages will miss out on a sizeable portion of the text. The essays in English vary enormously in quality of language, from excellent to mediocre, at best. At times, though quite rarely, the prose is truly incomprehensible. One sample should suffice: "But in 1770 did not want such effects the solitary, in his home retired Genius" (page 39). Enough said. While there are a few passages like this one, most of the English is at least understandable, if not a pleasure to the ear. There are also some obvious typographical errors, the exact genesis of which is very difficult to understand. For instance, the first ten von der Lasa games in Fiala's lengthy essay are identified as being played in 1936, rather than 1836. What happened is not at all clear.

Distracting as such errors can be, the volume as a whole is a valuable addition to the field. Students of chess history as well as collectors of historical chess games are clearly the market for this work, and while it no doubt is a small market, it is one that will appreciate the effort and energy that has gone into this volume, even if more careful editing and proofreading would have proven useful. The careful, and forgiving, reader will find much new material here, as well as a great deal about a figure whose position in chess history deserves much greater remembrance than he has yet received.

© 2003 John S. Hilbert All Rights Reserved.

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2003 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.