



BOOK REVIEWS

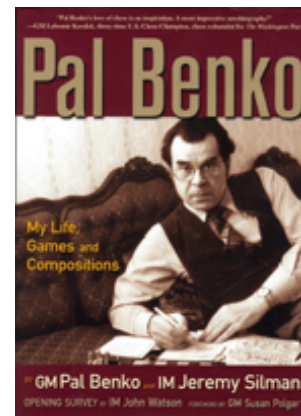


Best Chess Bio Yet?

Taylor Kingston

Pal Benko: My Life, Games and Compositions, by Pal Benko, Jeremy Silman, and John Watson, 2003 Siles Press, English Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 668pp., \$45.00.

Many of what are called “biographies” of chess figures hardly qualify as such, in the way the term is generally understood. They consist of a cursory personal profile, a hundred or so games, a list of tournaments and matches, and maybe some crosstables and testimonial quotations. At best one may get a decent idea of how someone played chess, but little about him as a man, or about any events in his life away from the board; at worst one may get a pile of recycled misinformation and plagiarized annotations.



There are exceptions. David Lawson’s *Paul Morphy: The Pride and Sorrow of Chess* portrays the chess career, personality, life and times of Morphy in great detail. Skinner & Verhoeven’s *Alexander Alekhine’s Chess Games, 1902-1946* contains all Alekhine’s known games and a mass of archival data. These and Edward Winter’s *Capablanca* are distinguished for their level of scholarship and depth of research. Less scholarly but still excellent popular histories include Munninghoff’s *Max Euwe, the Biography*, Hilbert’s *Napier, The Forgotten Chessmaster*, and several autobiographies such as Botvinnik’s *Achieving the Aim* and Bronstein’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.

A new title now joins that group. *Pal Benko: My Life, Games and Compositions* stands out in terms of both quantity and quality. Physically it is beautifully produced: a hefty, hardcover book, well bound and printed, with many

photographs. It has about 130 full games, extensively annotated, and many additional fragments. These are interspersed within a colorful, engaging autobiographical narrative. There are twenty pages of interviews with Benko and close friends, followed by a 130-page survey (by IM John Watson) of Benko's contributions to opening theory. The book concludes with 300 of Benko's compositions: a variety of problems, puzzles, and endgame studies.

Younger readers who know Benko only as *Chess Life's* endgame columnist may wonder why he merits such a book. Yet Benko is in fact one of the more important GMs of the past half-century, and for American chess he is one of the *most* important. We'll give a brief sketch before discussing the book in detail.

Born in 1928, Benko was one of Hungary's most promising young masters to emerge after World War II, winning the national championship in 1948 and placing high in the years 1950-55. Unhappy under the repressive Communist regime, he defected to the United States in 1957. There his chess career took off, as he won the US Open a record eight times, played on six US Olympic teams and in 14 US Championships, and twice placed high enough in FIDE Interzonals (=3rd of 21 in 1958, =6th of 23 in 1962) to qualify as a World Championship Candidate for 1959 and 1962. He might have qualified a third time, but in 1970 he ceded his place in the Interzonal to Bobby Fischer, a gracious act without which Fischer might never have become world champion. He has at various times beaten Fischer, Petrosian, Smyslov, Korchnoi, Reshevsky, Keres, Larsen, Geller, Portisch, Averbach, Taimanov, Gligoric, Najdorf, Seirawan and other top GMs.

As he gradually retired from competition, Benko stayed active in chess, as a writer (e.g. *The Benko Gambit* (1973), *Winning with Chess Psychology* (1991), and the recent revision of Fine's *Basic Chess Endings*), as an Olympic team captain (for both the US and Hungary), a second and adjournment analyst for various players, a coach and trainer (his pupils include the Polgar sisters), and as a composer: he is the only man ever to gain the Grandmaster title for both over-the-board play and composition. His Benko Gambit is one of the few major opening systems to be developed in the late 20th century, and is only one of his

contributions to opening theory.

IM Jeremy Silman (the “Sil” in Siles Press) came to know and admire Benko in the 1990s, and conceived the notion of producing an ideal biography, one that would “demonstrate my own vision of how such a book should be presented.” In contrast to the common run of instant books and carelessly assembled rehashes, Silman’s project took five years, and the results are impressive.

The Book as Memoir

The first 409 pages are a mix of memoirs and games. Benko’s narrative covers the years 1940-1992. It is not a dry, scholarly history but a very personal, subjective account, unpolished perhaps but full of life, color, pleasure and pain. The pain is especially evident during WW II and the post-war years of Russian occupation. A few excerpts:

“After three days on the run [in 1944], the Russian army appeared and policemen were everywhere. Suddenly I was hiding from the Hungarian army (who would shoot me on sight), the police (who would turn me over to the Hungarian army), and the Russian army (who were fond of shipping wayward males back to Russia as slave labor).” (p. 4)

“[I]f a Russian soldier asked for your coat or shoes, you wouldn’t hesitate to give it to him since the alternative was a horrible beating or even death ... Naturally life was much safer if you joined the Communist Party, as Szabo did. But ... how could I even entertain joining a group that had enslaved my father and brother?” (p. 5)

Eventually life regained a semblance of normality and Benko’s chess career progressed. However, it was nearly nipped in the bud in 1952, when an ill-conceived attempt to defect in Berlin led to his arrest:

“Back in Hungary, I was accused of being an American spy. An almost non-stop, three-week interrogation began that was designed to break me down mentally ... At first they asked me

about the CIA, but I didn't know what that was. A poorly pronounced "CIA" actually sounds like the Hungarian for cats ... Finally I said, 'I don't own any cats!' This enraged them ... I was dragged out of my cell and taken to a concentration camp — once they got the information they wanted (which in my case was nothing), they would just lock you up and forget about you completely ... The one person who did know that I was locked away was Grandmaster Szabo. He was the political editor of the top Hungarian chess magazine. The first page had nothing about chess on it at all, just political ravings about the wonders of communism. This mean-spirited person had no interest in helping me out; in fact, he was happy about my being arrested! ... one moment a national chess hero, the next a broken creature relegated to an existence of perpetual night ... I had been living like a diseased troll for a year and a half when a miracle occurred: Stalin died." (pp. 68-70)

Given amnesty in 1953 by the short-lived Nagy government (later ruthlessly crushed), Benko resumed a normal life but was more determined than ever to escape Hungary.

"My ticket to freedom was, naturally, chess. First on my agenda was to qualify for an out-of-country zonal. During the tournament that decided this, I gave myself some uneasy moments by playing too well! The problem was a bit humorous: If I came in first, I would qualify for a zonal that was going to be held in a Soviet-controlled country."

Eventually, Benko requested and was granted political asylum at the American embassy in Reykjavik, Iceland. Benko himself does not stress it, but the importance of his defection should not be understated. He was in fact the first player of GM strength to defect from an Iron Curtain country after WW II (two IMs, Kottnauer and Gereben, preceded him). His success may have encouraged later immigrants and defectors such as Korchnoi, Pachman, Alburtt, Igor Ivanov et al.

From 1957 on Benko's narrative brightens considerably. It features many interesting views of various chess masters:

“Stahlberg, for example, liked to drink ... The organizers wanted the big Soviet names to win, and they were worried that Stahlberg might do well and spoil their plans. To ensure this didn't happen, they allowed him to drink anything he wanted for free ... He happily took them up on this offer and almost won the tournament!” (p. 58)

“[At Buenos Aires 1960] One morning (at 4 A.M. to be exact!) I was woken up when someone relentlessly pounded on my door. There stood Fischer and Larry Evans, still up and running after exploring the city through the night! ... Naturally, I didn't take kindly to this blindly selfish behavior, and I blasted them for acting in such a manner. I was scheduled to play Reshevsky in four hours time ... When I explained this to Fischer, he said, ‘I would never agree to such a change in schedule!’ Apologies were never one of his strong points.” (pp. 105-6)

“Once I realized just how bad [Reshevsky's] memory was, I was able to have some good-natured fun with him. For example, I showed him a game once and asked, ‘What do you think of this game?’ He said, ‘It's nothing special at all. These guys weren't very good.’ — ‘But Sammy, this is one of your own games!’” (p. 117)

The interview section (pages 413-432), has many similar stories, as Silman interviews Benko, GM Larry Evans, and a mutual friend, NM Ron Gross.

Beyond light-hearted anecdotes, Benko provides a lot of material of interest to chess historians. This is especially true when he describes the 1962 Candidates Tournament:

“Fischer, positive that he would win the tournament, did terribly in Curaçao ... Finally,

he claimed that the Russians had conspired to make key draws in their games between themselves ... [He] also thought that some games might have been lost on purpose ... I can't claim to know the truth about Fischer's charges, but there *were* mini-teams working together. For example, Geller and Petrosian, who were close friends, did everything in their power to make sure Keres did not come in first ... [In my last game with Keres] I was a bit better, and adjourned. A while later, Petrosian and Geller came to me in secret and offered to help me beat their own countryman! I was disgusted." (pp. 126-128)

The Curaçao section is enhanced by some heretofore unpublished photos of Fischer visiting Tal in the hospital. We could fill pages with more enjoyable excerpts, but these suffice to give the reader a good idea of the tone and content. Benko tells interesting stories, seems frank and honest, and does not take himself too seriously. He is candid about his faults, for example explaining with humorous resignation his habitual time trouble, or describing ruefully the time he struck Fischer in Curaçao (as Martin Balsam said of Michael York in *Murder on the Orient Express*, "He is a hot-blooded Hungarian!"). The narrative is for the most part refreshingly free of vanity, self-extenuation, finger-pointing, demonization of rivals, and other forms of pettiness, mendacity and egotism all too often seen in chess autobiographies. Benko does still have a few old bones to pick — for example he flatly contradicts (without naming him) Isaac Kashdan's account (from the tournament book) of a forfeit claim Benko made against Reshevsky in the first Piatigorsky Cup, Los Angeles 1963. However, with one possible exception (Benko-Larsen, Winnipeg 1967) such tales are told more as colorful reminiscences, than as unforgiving revivals of an old grudge. Though he is hardly a meek shrinking violet, Benko is not intent on proving he was always right.

One gets a very good sense of Benko as a man. On the whole he comes across as a very human person, a likeable guy who loves chess, ladies, and a good time about equally, and who has lived a rich and varied life. A few factual errors exist, but the book is not intended as a

comprehensive, definitive account of an historical period — it is just one man telling his own story, and on that basis it succeeds admirably, as well as anything of its kind since Arnold Denker's *The Bobby Fischer I Knew and Other Stories* (1995).

The Book as Game Collection

Our enjoyment of Benko's memoirs have perhaps led us to give an unbalanced picture of the book so far. It is in fact primarily a game collection, with about eight or ten pages of games to every one of narrative. The 138 games span the years 1945 to 1992, encompassing a variety of events: Hungarian and US Championships, major and minor international tournaments, Olympiads and other team matches, FIDE Interzonals and Candidate tournaments, matches with Reshevsky and Bisguier, Swiss-system opens, and other events. A wide variety of opponents are seen, ranging from world champions (Botvinnik, Smyslov, Petrosian, Tal, Spassky and Fischer) down through various GMs and IMs to relatively obscure players.

Benko's annotation style is one of the most readable and instructive we have seen. He gives detailed analytical specifics when appropriate, and when not, good verbal explanations of general ideas. An example of the latter is this, discussing the position after **1.c4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d6 4.Nf3 Nf6 5.e4 0-0 6.Be2 e5 7.0-0 Nc6 8.d5 Ne7.**



Benko writes: "In many ways, this particular position represents the very heart and soul of the King's Indian Defense. White intends to overrun the queenside with a quick c4-c5 (prefaced by b2-b4 or Nf3-e1-d3) while Black will try to knock out the white King by ...Ne8 and then ...f7-f5-f4.

I've often been asked, 'Why would White play a line that gives his opponent a very strong kingside attack?' This is actually an important question! The answer lies in the importance of long-term and short-term advantages. In the short term, White might crash through on the queenside and win, or Black might decapitate White's King. However, the long-term advantage rests with White, who usually has a

significant advantage in most endgames. In a way, then, we can say that White is being given endgame odds, and you can imagine how much this would please me ...”

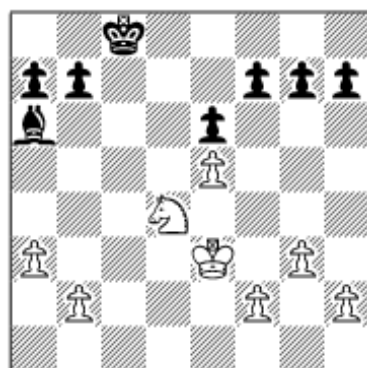
Benko has a deep grasp of the positional aspects of chess, and conveys it in a clear, understandable fashion, as here in Benko-Fischer, Portoroz Interzonal 1958, after **11...g6-g5?**:



“The impatience of youth! Here Bobby couldn’t stand the pin on his f6-Knight any longer, and breaks it at huge cost: his f5-square is now seriously weakened. An experienced tournament player would think twice before making such a move. Though f5 can’t be exploited right away, it is bound

to lead to further concessions in the long run.” It did, and White won (1-0, 41).

A good example of positional considerations in an endgame is this from Benko-Korchnoi, Curaçao 1962:

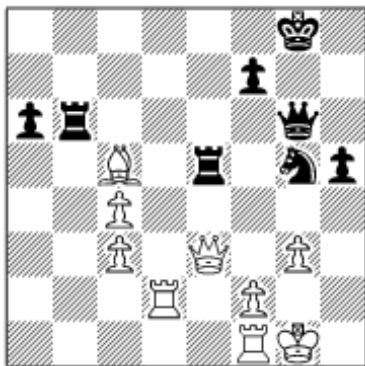


“The Rooks are traded and, to the uninitiated, the game appears to be headed for a draw. However, the position is actually very pleasant for White because only he can play for a win while Black will be defending for a long time to come. Why is White better? The flexibility of the Knight is one

huge factor (the d6-square in particular is calling to it!) and my central space advantage and superior King also combine to make Black’s life unpleasant.” This and showdowns with other endgame experts, such as Smyslov and Averbach (co-author of the 5-volume *Comprehensive Chess Endings*) make the book an endgame-lover’s delight.

Benko’s style being positional and endgame-oriented, the book does not abound in brilliant combinations; even in strong attacking positions, Benko’s preference was often to translate his advantage into a won ending rather than “sac,

sac, mate.” An example is Benko-Janosevic, Vrnjacka Banja 1973:



31.Rd8+ Kh7 32.Bd4 Rbe6 —

Now Benko considered “the flashy, strong but complicated 33.f4,” which *Fritz* in fact deems best. However, Benko “decided to be practical and play a simple and easily winning line.” **33.Bxe5 Rxe5 34.Rh8+** (not 34.Qxe5?? Nf3+) **34...Kxh8 35.Qxe5+ Kh7** and

1-0, 44. This practical approach, where perhaps the “best” move is not always chosen but the opponent’s counterplay is minimized, is typical of Benko’s style.

Still, there are many nice bits of tactical calculation, as in Benko-Kluger, Budapest 1955:



17.Bf4!! — Not the natural-looking 17.Bh6? 0-0-0!

18.Rxe7?? Rg8!. After the text Black cannot castle long: 17...0-0-0? 18.Rxe7 Rg8 19.Rc7+ Kb8 20.Rxf7+ and mate shortly.

17...Rd8 18.Bh6! — Now this works. **18...Kd7** — Relatively best was 18...Qxg2+, but White would surely win that endgame.

19.Rad1 Rg8 20.Rxd5+ Bxd5 21.Rxe7+ Kxe7 22.Qe5+ and **1-0, 32.**

The relative paucity of Tal-style fireworks notwithstanding, this is an excellent collection. The games are often aesthetically pleasing. Their instructive value is considerable: Benko’s positional and endgame lessons will benefit most readers far more than memorizing the latest Najdorf Sicilian variations, and his practical attitude of eliminating counterplay can yield many points.

Watson’s Opening Survey

In the opening, Benko tended to avoid sharp, critical lines. As he explains in the chapter “Creating the Benko Gambit”: “I admit I was never able to study openings — it really

bored me ... I found that I could always take a nap in any situation by just looking at some opening variation.” It might seem odd, then, that this book should have a major section devoted to his openings, “Pal Benko’s Creativity, An Opening Survey” by IM John Watson.

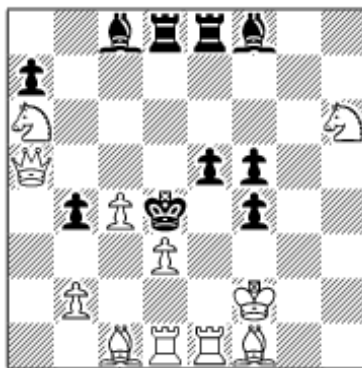
Yet this part succeeds nicely. Watson demonstrates how even in seemingly dull lines, “Benko was nevertheless able to conjure up complex problems that tested the skills of his opponents.” Watson examines Benko contributions to the white side of the English (the most common opening in the games section), 1.b3/b4 lines, the Reversed King’s Indian, and various lines for White against the Pirc, French, Sicilian, QID, KID, QGD and other systems. From the black side, Watson examines the Sicilian at length, especially Benko’s anti-Sozin line **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 d6 6.Bc4 Qb6**, and lines in the Scheveningen involving a queenside minority attack. The Modern Defense, **1...g6**, gets some attention, and of course the Benko Gambit, **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6**, receives many pages, along with the Grünfeld and other anti-d4 lines.

Watson discerns some interesting stylistic trends, such as the frequency of early queen exchanges and Benko’s skill in the resulting queenless middle games. He also explains some of the strategic basis underlying Benko’s ideas, and notes innovations Benko pioneered that later became mainstream theory. His discussions include many of the games Benko presents in the book’s first part, supplemented by other examples. Since Benko’s annotations do not go into great detail about openings, Watson’s survey provides a valuable supplement for those wanting more variations and background information.

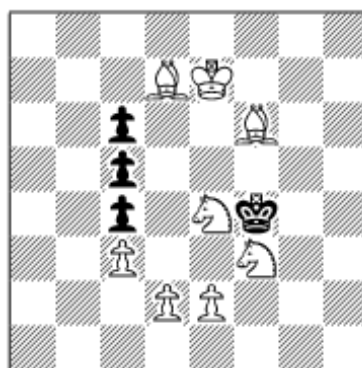
Compositions

The book’s fourth and final part is a 92-page collection of Benko’s compositions, 300 in all. As mentioned, Benko is a grandmaster also in this area of chess artistry, winning innumerable prizes. Many different kinds of compositions are given: mates in two, three, four and more moves, letter problems, helpmates, endgame studies, and puzzles. Some examples, with solutions at the review’s end:

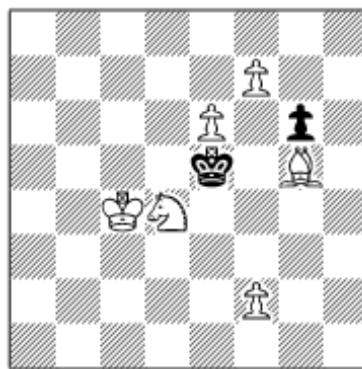
A: White mates in two:



B: A “letter problem,” in which the pieces form the letter G. White mates in three:



C: A puzzle. White mates in two after taking back his last move:



D: An endgame study. White to move and win:

Capablanca, Robert “Hubner,” Richard “Reti” etc. At least one reference is missing: the first mention of Stahlberg is on page 58, not 64. A back-cover endorsement by Anthony Saily describes Benko as coming from “the land of Reti,” but Réti was Czech, not Hungarian.

A table of selected “significant tournaments and matches” is provided. A complete table might have been preferable. There is a bothersome discrepancy between the cover blurb, which with some exaggeration describes Benko as “a winner of innumerable international competitions,” and the selective list, which shows only three first place finishes (two of them shared) out of 61 events, omitting the rest apparently because it is limited to the higher category tournaments. Also the selection criteria are a bit unclear; one wonders why, for example, Curaçao 1962, probably the strongest event Benko ever played in, is not included. Nor are two of his best results, his 2nd (behind Lein) at Novi Sad 1972, and his =1st (with Quinteros) at Torremolinos 1973. The cover blurb (this time without exaggeration) describes Benko as “the most dominating ‘open tournament’ player in American history,” and the table does mention his eight US Open victories, but none of his other Swiss-system wins, such as the National Open. A complete career table would have been lengthy, as Benko played a lot, but such has been done, as for example in the recent Tony Miles book *It's Only Me*.

We are not given much to rave on this site, but in this case we must make an exception. This may be the best chess autobiography we have ever seen, and one of the best chess biographies period, at least of the less scholarly sort. The book is simply outstanding on all levels: as a memoir, as a game collection, as chess instruction, as chess artistry, as a physically impressive product, even as a photo album. And its price makes it a bargain for a book of this quality. It gives a clear, detailed picture of Benko both as a man, and as a contributor to the game. Publisher Silman has raised the bar for all subsequent chess biographies, creating a fine tribute to an important GM.

Our thanks to Bernard Cafferty and Claus van de Vlierd for contributing information to this review.

Problem solutions:

A: **1.Kg1!** and mate next.

B: **1.Ne5 Kxe4 2.e3 Kd5 3.Bxc6#.**

C: White takes back 1.f6-f7, and plays **1.f3 Kd6 Bf4#.**

D: Unlike most problems, endgame studies resemble real game situations and involve lengthy variations rather than a single key. We give just the main line here, representing best play for both sides: **1.Nb5!! Kb1 2.Nac3+ Kc2 3.Nd4+ Kd3 4.Nd1 h2 5.f4 Kxd4 6.Nf2 Kc3 7.f5 b5 8.f6 b4+ 9.Ka2 Kc2 10.f7 b3+ 11.Ka3 b2 12.f8=Q b1=Q 13.Qf5+, 1-0.**

Order *Pal Benko: My Life, Games and Compositions*
by Pal Benko, Jeremy Silman, and John Watson



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