



## BOOK REVIEWS



## Updating a Laconic Legend

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*The Life and Games of Akiva Rubinstein, Volume 1: Uncrowned King* (2nd edition), John Donaldson and Nikolay Minev, 2006 Russell Enterprises, Paperback, 402pp, Figurine Algebraic Notation, \$29.95

*During the 1928 Bad Kissingen tournament Tartakower wittily remarked one day that he had just sent his one millionth telegram, while Rubinstein had just uttered his tenth word in two weeks. – Reuben Fine, The World's Great Chess Games*

One of the most brilliant careers in chess history was that of Akiva Rubinstein (1882-1961). The youngest of twelve children born to a poor Jewish family in what is now Poland but was then part of Tsarist Russia, the young Rubinstein seemed destined to be a rabbi, when in his teens chess suddenly became his lifelong obsession.

Within a few years of learning the moves he was master strength, and by 1907 he reached the topmost rank, among the top four players in the world along with Lasker, Tarrasch, and Maróczy. His tournament record for 1907-1912, with a score of +173 –31 =96, eleven first prizes and four seconds in seventeen events, was the best in the world, and in 1914 he challenged Lasker for the world title.

Besides his excellence in practical play, Rubinstein was very important to opening theory, devising important, fundamental innovations in the Queen's Gambit, French Defense, Four Knights Game and other systems. And his skill in endgames, especially rook endings, was unsurpassed. Along with a handful of players: Pillsbury, Keres, Reshevsky, Bronstein and a very few others, he is considered someone of world champion caliber, who could and perhaps should have won the title, had Fate been a bit kinder (hence the subtitle *Uncrowned King*).





Yet for all its success Rubinstein's career was ultimately one of the more tragic in chess history, and while he played in a style of classic logic, precision and clarity, he himself was one of the game's most enigmatic, most laconic and least accessible personalities. And while his later international career is well-documented, many of his earlier games have been lost, and much of his early life is obscure, with the few known facts sometimes garbled by legend.

Such factors make him a very challenging and interesting subject for biographers and researchers. Until recently, the best Rubinstein biography and games collection in English was a 1994 release from International Chess Enterprises. However, that is no longer true. This is not to slight the 1994 edition – not at all – because now the same two authors, IMs John Donaldson and Nikolay Minev, have produced an expanded second edition.

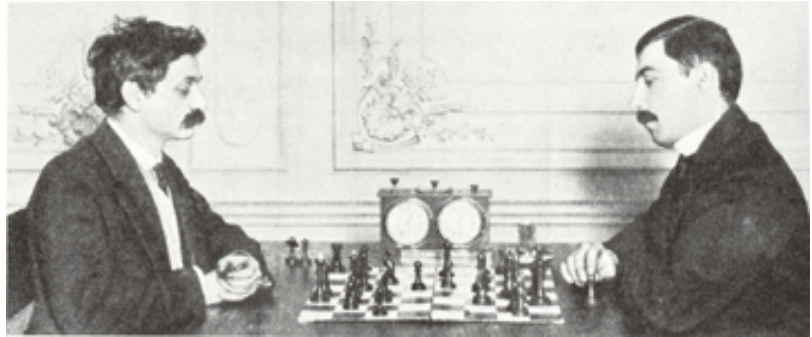
The book covers approximately the first half of Rubinstein's career, through 1920. Compared to the 1994 edition, it has eighteen more games (492 vs. 474), and eighty-one more pages (402 vs. 321). As with almost all books of this type, it is mostly a games collection interspersed with biographical narrative. We'll now discuss these two aspects separately.

The book begins with a six-page section on Rubinstein's early life. Much is uncertain here; even his date of birth is not known for sure. Some long-standing legends are debunked, in particular the oft-repeated one of the near-novice Rubinstein disappearing for a few months around 1901, then suddenly reappearing at the Lodz club to challenge and defeat Georg Salwe, city champion and later All-Russian Champion. A pleasingly romantic story with some basis, but Donaldson and Minev have determined that if such a thing did happen, it was in Bialystok, not Lodz, and Rubinstein's opponent was probably a local player named Bartoszkiewicz, around Class A strength, not the 2500-strength Salwe.

The opening chapter describes Rubinstein's development in Lodz, which was then, along with Moscow and St. Petersburg, one of the three main chess centers in Russia. He did eventually surpass Salwe, drawing a match with him in 1903, and

winning matches in 1904 and 1907.

After this section on Rubinstein's early life, the narrative becomes mainly a series of introductions to tournaments and matches, describing for example Rubinstein earning the master title in his first international event, the Barmen 1905 Hauptturnier, then making a strong impression in the marathon 1906 Ostende Congress, and certifying his status among the world's best by his results at Ostende 1907 (equal first with Bernstein ahead of Mieses, Nimzovitch, Fleischmann, Teichmann, Duras and twenty-two others) and clear first at Carlsbad 1907, ahead of Maróczy, Leonhardt, Nimzovitch, Schlechter, Vidmar, Duras, Teichmann and other greats.



This brief-introduction style continues for about the next 275 pages, with a few longer passages, for example on the Polish master David Przepiórka, Rubinstein's legendary draw with Wolf at Carlsbad 1907 (in this case a true legend, say Donaldson and Minev), the 5th All-Russian Championship (Lodz 1907-8), St. Petersburg 1909 (Rubinstein's first meeting with Lasker), abortive plans for a 1909 match with Capablanca, and a 1912 *BCM* article by Paul Leonhardt surprisingly critical of Rubinstein's abilities.

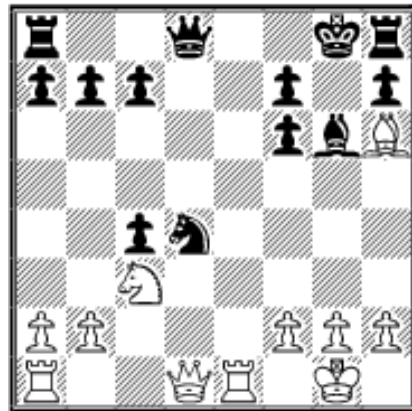
Pages 290-295 describe at length the negotiations and terms for the Lasker-Rubinstein world title match, which was to begin in the fall of 1914. The outbreak of World War I in August of that year was therefore not only a general tragedy for mankind, but a keen loss for the chess world, and a calamity for Rubinstein personally, since of course plans for the match had to be abandoned, and he never got another chance. The book describes how, despite his Polish homeland being a major battleground, Rubinstein managed to stay surprisingly active in chess, playing five tournaments and two matches during 1916-18.

It is this section that perhaps most tantalizes and disappoints from the biographical standpoint. It is generally considered that WW I had a traumatic psychological effect on Rubinstein, and that he was never quite the same again, either at the board or away. As Fine wrote about his later years, "Slowly, a tragic persecution complex engulfed his mind." The authors think it likely that the roots of this complex lay in his wartime experience, but cannot supply any details. It is hard to fault them for this, though; the factual record is simply too sparse, and the quiet Rubinstein, true to our opening epigraph, did not himself talk about it (or about much at all).

Even after the armistice, peace did not come to Poland, because of a border conflict with the new Russian Bolshevik regime, so Rubinstein left his war-ravaged homeland for the relative calm of Sweden, where he stayed for the next

year or two. The narrative concludes with a description of his activities circa 1919-20 there and in Holland, which included three tournaments, a match with Bogolyubov, and many simul (bringing some much-needed money to Rubinstein, whose insecure financial situation was made worse by the post-war hyperinflation of the German mark).

We turn now to the games, which are the book's main focus. There are 492: all Rubinstein's known games through 1920. This is more than any database we have: ChessBase 2005 has 419, Chess Assistant only 287. The earliest example, from 1897, has this nice finish:

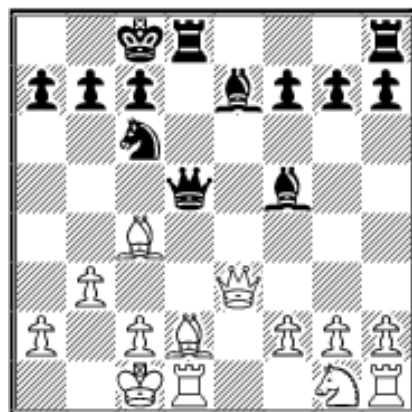


**15.Re8+! Qxe8 16.Qxd4 Qe5 17.Nd5!! 1-0**

This game shows one of the new edition's revisions: the first edition labeled it a club game from Bialystok circa 1901, but further research now indicates it was a correspondence game from 1897, when Rubinstein would have been only 15 years old.

Rubinstein produced so many beautiful games and combinations, and they have been anthologized so often, that it is hard to find

unknown gems. We will spare the reader repetition of such great but overly familiar classics as Rtlewi-Rubinstein, Lodz 1907, or Rubinstein-Lasker, St. Petersburg 1909, and offer a sample from games unfamiliar at least to the reviewer:



**Goldfarb-Rubinstein, blitz game, Lodz, 1907: 11...Qa5! 12.a4 If 12.Bxa5 Ba3+ 13.Kb1 Rxd1 + etc. 12...Ba3+ 13.Kb1 Nb4 14.Bd3 Rxd3! 15.cxd3 Qd5 0-1**

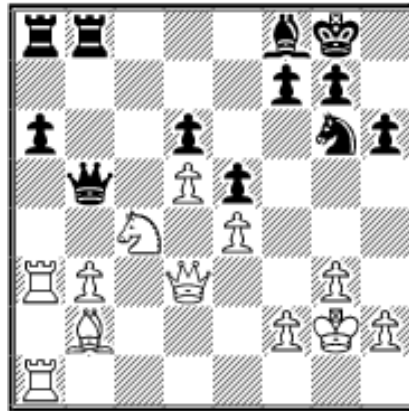


**Alekhine-Rubinstein, Vilna 1912: 19...Rxf3!**  
 "An artistic sacrifice of the exchange whose soundness can only be demonstrated by a series of quiet but forceful moves." (Reinfeld) **20. gxf3 Nxe5 21.Qe2 Rf8 22.Nd2 Ng6 23.Rfe1 Bd6 24.f4 Nexf4 25.Qf1 Nxf3+ 26.Kh1 g4 27. Qe2 Qf5 0-1**



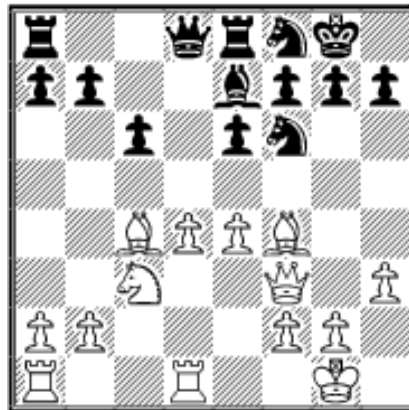
**Belsitzman-Rubinstein**, Warsaw City  
Championship 1917: **16...Qxh2+!** **17.Kxh2**  
**hxg3+ 18.Kg1 Rh1#**

However, most of Rubinstein's great artistry lay not in sacrificial combinations, but in more delicate but no less deadly positional maneuvering. A marvelous example is **Rubinstein-Duras**, Carlsbad 1911:



Rubinstein wins by retreating with **24.Bc1!** Intending 25.Be3, so that Black cannot support his weak a-pawn with a rook on b6 or a7. **24...Rb7 25.Be3 f6 26.f3 Ne7 27.Qf1!** Another retreat. Since Black's only really active piece is his queen, Rubinstein wants to trade it off, and so unpins his knight to make Nc4-d2 possible. **27...Nc8 28.Nd2 Qb4 29.Qc4! Qxc4 30.Nxc4 Rab8 31.Nd2 Rc7 32.Rxa6** winning the pawn and eventually the game (1-0, 52).

While Rubinstein had a reputation as a purely objective player, who always played the board, not the man, certain games definitely contradict this notion. Case in point is **Rubinstein-Schlechter**, Berlin 1918:



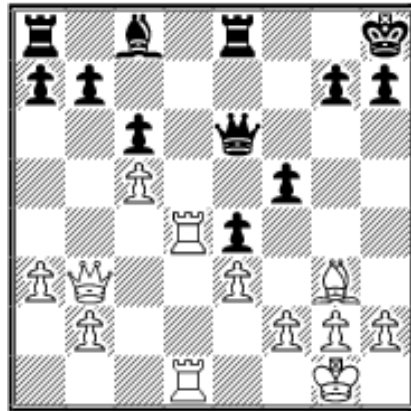
After **13.d5!!** Hans Kmoch comments "It is interesting to note that Rubinstein plays for ideas that are psychologically abhorrent to his opponent ... There has been much speculation about what grandmaster Rubinstein used to think about in the first 10 or 15 minutes that he used at the beginning of each game. That this time was employed in remembering his game against the same opponent in 1909 seems convincing." Kmoch refers to a St. Petersburg game in which Rubinstein used a similar d4-d5 thrust to great effect.

We don't have an exact count, but probably well over half the games are annotated, especially the more important ones, usually by a mix of contemporary analysts (e.g. Lasker, Schlechter, Tartakower, Spielmann, Tarrasch, Mises, Rubinstein himself), later writers (particularly Kmoch, who wrote a book of 100 Rubinstein games in 1941, but also Reinfeld, Razuvaev, Marin et al), and the authors themselves. Most of the new edition's additional eighty-one pages consist of expanded game notes.

Of the eighteen rediscovered games, probably the most important are five from Ostende 1906, against Duras, Gattie, Leonhardt, Salwe, and Swiderski. The others

are mainly non-tournament games from Rubinstein's time in Sweden and Holland 1919-20.

As always in a book with this many games, some analytical lapses occur. Here for example, the conclusion of **Rubinstein-Mieses**, first match game, 1905:

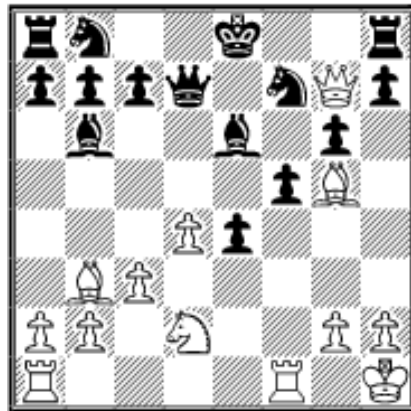


**23.Rd8! h6 24.Qc3 Qe7 25.Bh4! 1-0**, makes no mention of the fact that **24...Qe7??** was a terrible blunder, and that with **24...Kh7** or **27...Qf7**, Black could have held out much longer.

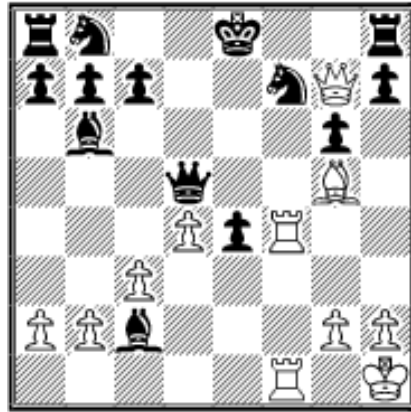
Similarly, in the aforementioned 1917 game Belsitzman-Rubinstein:



It goes unnoted that had White played **16.Nf3!** here instead of **16.Qe2??**, the queen sacrifice on h2 would have been prevented and White might have been able to consolidate the material advantage he had grabbed with **15.cx(N)d4** the move before.



And here in **Rubinstein-Granas**, a 1905 club game where White gave king knight odds, after **20...Bxb3**, the reply **21.Nxe4** does not deserve the two exclamation marks awarded it, in fact after **21...fxe4 22.Rae1?** (Better is **22.Rxf7 Qxf7 23.Qxh8+**) had Black played **22.Bd5!**, White would have been busted. Even after the inferior **22...Bc2?! 23.Rf4 Qd5?** (Better is **23...Qf5! 24.Rxf5 gxf5** and Black is still winning) **24.Ref1**



Had Black avoided **24...Rf8??** in favor of **24...Kd7!** **25.Rxf7+ Kc6** **26.Qax8 Kb5** he had some chance to survive, instead of being mated by **25.Rxf7! Qxf7** **26.Rxf7 Rxf7** **27.Qg8+** (**27.Qe5+** mates faster) **27...Kd7** **28.Qxf7+ Kc6** **29.c4 Bxd4** **30.Qd5+ Kb6** **31.Qb5#**

However, on the whole the annotations are sound, with Donaldson and Minev often correcting oversights by earlier analysts. As far as biographical and historical matters are concerned, we saw no significant errors. As we noted earlier, there are some unfortunate lacunae; for example the authors admit they have basically no idea what Rubinstein did for all of 1913, and for much of WW I. However, we tend to ascribe this to the poverty of the historical record, rather than any negligence by Donaldson and Minev. Even the best archaeologist cannot dig up artifacts that simply are not there.

As befits a serious historical work, the book is well indexed: by player, annotator, opening name and ECO code, plus a general index and bibliography. A number of black-and-white photos showing Rubinstein, his major contemporaries, and several tournaments are included. The book is attractively laid out, and is well written, with very few grammatical or typographical errors.

To sum up, we give the second edition of *The Life and Games of Akiva Rubinstein, Volume 1: Uncrowned King* a strong recommendation. Donaldson and Minev have not rested on their 1994 laurels, but have continued their research into the life and career of one of chess history's most important players. The book succeeds in all the ways a book of this type should: as biography, as history, as a game collection, and as chess instruction. We look forward to a new edition of volume two.

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**Order** *The Life and Games of Akiva Rubinstein, Volume 1: Uncrowned King* (2nd edition)  
by John Donaldson and Nikolay Minev

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