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## Andor Lilienthal and His Contribution to the History of Modern Chess

by Dmitry Gorodin

"I am a part of chess history and nobody can ignore this. If I will not write my history myself, somebody else will..." [\[i\]](#) These words of Wilhelm Steinitz could also belong to many other players who made chess history.

2001 was the anniversary year for several chess giants. Euwe's 100<sup>th</sup>, Botvinnik's 90<sup>th</sup>, Smyslov's 80<sup>th</sup> and Korchnoi's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary were among the most important. The person whose anniversary remained relatively inconspicuous is Botvinnik's contemporary, the oldest grandmaster in the world, Andor Lilienthal. He, without a doubt, belongs to a cohort of the most remarkable chess players of the 20th century. A natural talent, who grew up in poverty and indigence, a European, who names both Hungary and Russia as his homeland, a self-made man, who became established in the chess elite without chess education, a coffee house player, who achieved a Candidate tournament - Lilienthal was

acquainted with all world champions beginning with Lasker. He was a coach of Smyslov and Petrosian. Fischer and Karpov are among his friends.

I try to speak here mainly not about Lilienthal's life and career, but about his contribution to chess history. Fortunately Lilienthal is not only the person, who has been actively involved in the chess history of the 20th century, but also the person who has published his memoirs.

"I do not possess records [...] same as I did not collect my games for a long time [...]. Now it has been more than five years already since I began collecting my games and experiences and arranging my memories and the history of my irregular life to write a book for the benefit of the young generation." [\[ii\]](#) Lilienthal wrote these words in the eighties in the preface to his book *Chess Was My Life*. At that time the only book published by Lilienthal was *A Life for Chess* in Russian. [\[iii\]](#) This early book contains a biographical sketch and 60 annotated games. Probably Lilienthal was not completely satisfied with his first book. He would have liked to describe more historical events and present a chronological outline of his chess career. He also wanted to tell about the remarkable people he met. His book *Chess Was My Life* (published in Hungarian in 1985 [\[iv\]](#) and in German in 1988), in my opinion, fully met those objectives.

Lilienthal learned the game of chess at the age of 13. At the beginning of his career the "Golden Chess Years" had not yet passed. His entrance was

influenced by the two, so to say, “chess-historical” factors. First, chess was still largely played in the coffee houses and second, the worker’s chess movement took an upswing at that time. In Lilienthal’s own words, "In the tailor’s trade union I pursued chess games and discovered the true beauty of the game. And frankly, I had also seen that some games were played for cash.[\[v\]](#) [...] In those days, due to the unemployment one could dedicate a lot of time to chess. So I often visited the tailor’s trade union and became acquainted with some of the best players. I moved from one coffee house to another and made my living - like the masters Sterk and Zinner - by playing chess..."[\[vi\]](#)

Lilienthal’s memories are full of facts, names, dates, and other historical information. The following statement is significant. It is taken from Lilienthal's report on the international team championship of the workers’ chess associations held in the days of his youth: "It is a moral obligation for me to name, in the order of boards, the players who fought for our great success."[\[vii\]](#) Lilienthal's detailed report on Hungarian chess life makes it evident that not only Moscow and Berlin, but Budapest as well had been infected by chess fever at the end of the twenties. No wonder Hungary dominated the first chess Olympiads. Lilienthal describes his way to the national Olympic team, which he joined however only in 1933.

Another chess center of Europe was, of course, Vienna. Lilienthal tells about his meetings with best

Austrian players in the Café Central. [\[viii\]](#) It was in Vienna in 1929 where Lilienthal met with a true chess giant for the first time. Capablanca was giving a simultaneous display there. Lilienthal remembers: "Finally I was the last, who was still playing against Capablanca. In the middlegame [...] I got an advantage. However the renowned grandmaster looked at me in such a way that all my courage disappeared and, with a trembling voice, I offered him a draw. Capablanca accepted it so quickly that when I wanted to ask him rather awkwardly for an autograph, he was already gone accompanied by a pretty lady."<sup>8</sup>

Lilienthal next met Capablanca 5 years later in Hastings 1934/35. This was a truly historical event because of Lilienthal's famous victory – after having sacrificed his queen. Lilienthal writes: "I still don't remember any sign of affliction in his expression and in his eyes, when he gave up the game. The Cuban was elegant, natural and polite as always. He congratulated me with a smile, wishing me further success. Another episode of Capablanca's correct sports behaviour is also worth mentioning. In the last round, my 4-5<sup>th</sup> place depended upon the result of the game between Capablanca and Botvinnik. If Capablanca had triumphed, then I would have landed together with him in the 4-5<sup>th</sup> places. Had the game ended with a draw, I would have shared the 5-6<sup>th</sup> places with Botvinnik. Botvinnik offered Capablanca a draw in a somewhat worse position. Capablanca replied to him that he would give his consent only with my agreement. Today such a gesture seems

quite incredible. I [...] thanked Capablanca for his fairness and, naturally, consented that the game was a draw.”[\[ix\]](#)

Lilienthal watched the Berlin rounds of the World Championship in October 1929 in the Café König. He tells: "At the arrival I met two world champions at once, Lasker - whom I recognised instantly thanks to the pictures - and Alekhine. Without being too shy, as 18-year-old boys tend to be, I approached Lasker one afternoon and asked him, somewhat impudently, to play chess with me. However he was already busy playing Go and answered very politely that he had not yet practiced chess that day, and therefore he would not play with me. I still kept my good mood as I saw the world-famous Alekhine and Bogoljubow playing against each other. As a kibitzer I was able to stand next to Ahues, Richter, Kagan and many other well-known chess players." [\[x\]](#)

The first coffee house that he visited in Paris was not the Café de La Régence, but Café Lido. There he met with a Russian painter Bart, who was also the organizer of the Paris chess tournaments, editor of the chess column of the *Miroir du Monde* and supporter of many young chess players. [\[xi\]](#) It is to him that Lilienthal owes the entrance into the Café de La Régence. He describes in detail the atmosphere that prevailed there: for instance, Napoleon's chess table next to a portrait of Alekhine in a gilded frame. In the Café de La Régence Lilienthal saw Kostic, Znosko-Borovsky and Tartakower, whereby the latter two, according to Lilienthal, "were rivaling for

the dominance in France."[\[xii\]](#) There were also famous amateurs, including Bernstein, Duchamp, and Prokofiev.[\[xiii\]](#) Lilienthal recalls that Bernstein, who was an attorney, told him once: "You should look for an occupation for living, since it's as hard to earn money with chess in Paris as it is anywhere else." Lilienthal calls the well-known painter Duchamp, "the most talented French chess player." About the composer Prokofiev he writes: "We played many games and I can state in all seriousness that he had a master strength in today's measure."[\[xiv\]](#) Although Lilienthal often analysed with Maróczy in Budapest, he names Dr. Tartakower as his first teacher.[\[xv\]](#)

An interesting memory of Lilienthal is connected with Jacques Mieses: "It was not the world tournament, but its opening day, 11 May 1930, that remained unforgettable for me: it was the beginning of the first international tournament in my life. It was a celebration for me – to step out from the world of the coffee houses on the international stage. [...] Already at the start I was to play with old Mieses, who crushed me in a way like perhaps nobody was able to later. I was so ashamed that could only keep resisting until the 16<sup>th</sup> move."[\[xvi\]](#)

At that time Mieses was 65-years old. Lilienthal was only 19 – but he had by then already played his first blitz games against the world champion. According to Lilienthal, Alekhine underestimated his opponent, and, as the result, only managed to win once after three consecutive defeats. Alekhine looked at him

sharply and explained in a firm voice that he would like to play four more games. Lilienthal replied that he would prefer not to play anymore, and to retain the result as a memory – the statement to which Alekhine reacted with a smile. Overall, Lilienthal gives a very positive description of Alekhine's personality. For example, he recalls that Alekhine paid the participation fee for a blitz tournament for him. When Lilienthal won that tournament and wanted to pay back his debt, Alekhine answered: "You will pay back, when you become a master!" [\[xvii\]](#)

Lilienthal however describes an incident at the end of the tournament in Hastings 1933/34: "The final result brought quite a surprise for the chess world. My friend Salo Flohr became the winner. Alekhine and I shared 2nd-3rd places. Yet as much as I was pleased with this sensational result, so was Alekhine upset about it. For him only first place meant something. [...] My friend Flohr had – unfortunately – a "good idea". He suggested making a joke on Alekhine. At the age of 22 anyone is ready for fun. I went to Alekhine and said to him with a smile: "Don't be so sad, you have just caught up with me!" Alekhine [...] jumped up and said to me bitterly: "Lilienthal, I did not expect this from you, whom I helped so often! Remember: from now on you will not participate in any tournament in which I play!" [...] Then my friend Flohr gave me some real good advice. In the morning he found Alekhine and apologized on our behalf. After that I also ventured to come up to him. Alekhine was good-natured". [\[xviii\]](#)

Nevertheless after this incident Alekhine and Lilienthal did not play tournament games. They met only twice: at the Chess Olympiad in Warsaw 1935 and, for the last time, in 1938 in Prague, where Alekhine was negotiating with Flohr about a match for the world championship.

In this lecture I am not covering Lilienthal's memoirs of the World War II and post-war periods. However, I would like to quote a fragment from his 1963 China-report, as it leads us back in the past: "In Shanghai we were told an interesting fact from the history of chess. In 1933 Alexander Alekhine played there on 48 boards simultaneously - with the result  $+41 = 4 - 3$ . But the second simultaneous display brought a surprising result. In that round the Chinese could hold consultations between themselves against the world champion. The result that Alekhine could have hardly been proud of ( $+2 = 6 - 3$ ) was witness to the remarkable play of the Chinese." [\[xix\]](#)

I have controversial information about this competition. Probably Alekhine played blindfold against Russian emigrants, but nevertheless I don't know any other simultaneous display that he lost.

Lilienthal notes the respect afforded chess in different countries, for instance, in Spain, which he calls, by the way, "Europe's original homeland of chess." [\[xx\]](#) Lilienthal recalls his simultaneous play in Bilbao in 1934 as the most memorable event in his entire career. He writes: "The interest was enormous. I took up the fight against 121 players, but that was not all. That meeting remains unforgettable for me!"

My photos were placed on the boards, and all participants received chessboards with my personal autograph. My result (+ 107, = 13, – 1!) rolled across Europe and appeared on the pages of major daily papers." [\[xxi\]](#)

In September 1934 Lilienthal went to Amsterdam. "As until then I had not visited the chess-loving Netherlands, I gladly accepted the invitation of the internationally acknowledged master Landau. He had already invited me for a match a few months before, and offered accommodation in his lodging. [...] During my stay I made friends with well-known chess players – with some for a lifetime, like with the young Max Euwe, who had greatly contributed towards the upswing of chess in the Netherlands by that time. I owe much to Landau. Even today I feel deep sorrow that this noble man became the victim of the Nazis." [\[xxii\]](#)

In October 1934 Lilienthal received an invitation for the international tournament in Moscow. However a visit to the first socialist state in the country of admiral Horthy was at that time problematic, to say the least. "It would have been impossible, writes Lilienthal, had it not been for the help of one man. This man, whom I always remember gratefully, was Dr. Árpád Vajda, the well-known chess master - and at the same time the police officer. [...] At that time I could not even imagine that this would be a crucial event in my life." [\[xxiii\]](#)

About Moscow 1935 Lilienthal recounts: "The

international tournament exceeded all of my expectations. I was truly amazed. I simply could not imagine such level of organization and management at that time. [...] So far I had not seen anything similar at any other European tournament! In the corridors, behind the demonstration boards, the sculptures of the Immortals were lined up. Almost five thousand people went through the tournament hall and the rest of the building daily. And that was not all! Thousands more were watching the games at the demonstration boards for hours from the outside, in severe February cold. Later, when I became a permanent resident of the Soviet Union, I got used to this great interest in chess and even found it natural. But at that time it appeared so overwhelming that I still feel obliged to commemorate it here after 50 years." [\[xxiv\]](#)

In Moscow Lilienthal for the first time played against Emanuel Lasker. He remembers: "Lasker was the favourite of the audience. His way of playing did not at all reflect the fact that he was sixty-six years old! He was greatly respected. A separate room was at his disposal, where he could take a rest during the game. His manners were impeccable. We admired him! While we analysed excited our adjourned games, he took a rest or went for a walk. He never analysed his adjourned games and nevertheless continued playing them in the best way." [\[xxv\]](#)

In an interview with the Russian magazine *Anomalia* Lilienthal told an amusing episode that took place during the Moscow 1935 tournament. Nikolay Krylenko, the People's Commissar of Justice and a

great promoter of chess had asked him whether he wanted to visit Lenin. Lilienthal answered: "Yes, of course" – and was greatly disappointed, having learned that Lenin had already been dead 11 years, and Krylenko took the guest into his mausoleum instead.[\[xxvi\]](#)

After the tournament Lilienthal became a chess coach in the central house of the Soviet trade unions. He writes: "In spite of repeated requests I had also called off the training match with Euwe before his world championship match against Alekhine. For the first time in my life I led a stable, happy family life in Moscow without financial problems."[\[xxvii\]](#)

Obviously Lilienthal made good connections with Krylenko, who also protected his problem-free chess life. This, however, did not last for long. Lilienthal remembers: "The outstanding event of 1937 was the Chess Olympiad in Stockholm. My participation in it was not an easy task, even though I was a Hungarian citizen living in Moscow. [...] I went to Krylenko and asked for his support. He helped me and also assured me of his backing for the return visa. [...] Some rounds had already been played when my friend Stahlberg told me that Krylenko had been arrested. I did not believe him. However, he showed me the story in a newspaper. [...] For the sake of history it must be added that I saw Krylenko once again afterwards. But when in the fall of that year I played in Tbilisi, he had already disappeared from the public life."[\[xxviii\]](#)

According to A. Zvjagintsev and Yu. Orlov:

*Crucified by Revolution. Russian and Soviet Procurators. 20<sup>th</sup> Century. 1922-1936*, Krylenko was arrested on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1938. On July 26, 1937, during the Stockholm Olympiad, the arrest of Krylenko's brother Vassily was reported.[\[xxix\]](#)

Lilienthal mentions the episode, which determined the fate of one of the strongest Hungarian chess players: "In the summer of 1936 I received a letter from my friend Lajos Steiner, who was afraid of being persecuted by the Nazis. He asked me to help him move to Australia. I discussed his request with the management of the Soviet chess federation, and received an offer to organize a match between Steiner and Panov in September 1936. After the match that ended in a draw, Lajos was paid a sum that was sufficient to cover for his travel to Australia via Tokyo."[\[xxx\]](#)

The Soviet chess historian Grekov mentioned in his book *The History of Chess Competitions* that it was one win and one loss for both players.[\[xxxi\]](#) If Steiner indeed had to play two games only, one can imagine how generous his compensation was.

An interesting but controversial episode is connected with a simultaneous display in Moscow in 1935. Lilienthal writes: "A simultaneous display on 150 boards, which took place in the Gorky Park in Moscow, is particularly memorable. The play had already progressed considerably, when it began to rain. [...] Within seconds 150 large black umbrellas were stretched over the chessboards. Finally I also

got an umbrella, which a young man held over me. He accompanied me from board to board for about 5 to 6 hours. This helpful boy was Yuri Averbakh.”[\[xxxii\]](#)

Grandmaster Averbakh in his book *Searching for the Truth* writes about a simultaneous exhibition performed by Lilienthal on 155 boards.[\[xxxiii\]](#) According to Averbakh, who was 12 years old in 1935, he had also been one of the 12 players who won against Lilienthal. I asked grandmaster Averbakh about this episode. His answer was: "In the umbrella case Lilienthal makes a mistake, because at that time I was not so tall as now and was only playing."

In the autumn of 1939, after four years of residence in the Soviet Union, Lilienthal "with great delight," in his own words,[\[xxxiv\]](#) became a Soviet citizen. He won the XII<sup>th</sup> Championship of the Soviet Union together with Bondarevsky leaving behind Smyslov, Keres, Boleslavsky and Botvinnik. Lilienthal remembers: "In accordance with the tournament's regulations the third-best should also be awarded the title 'Grandmaster of the Soviet Union.' The Chairman of the Soviet Committee for Physical Culture and Sport, Mr. Snegov, stated that in his opinion I was still a very 'young' Soviet citizen for this title. He also made certain allusions: 'You think perhaps that an engineer or a scientist coming from a foreign country to the Soviet Union also immediately becomes our engineer or professor?' After this discussion, not really pleasant for myself, I met my

old friend Isaac Mazel. He advised me not to step into the argument but to write a short letter to Molotov instead. I followed his advice – and was very quickly awarded the title of 'Grandmaster of the Soviet Union.' After that I waited for the match for the title of national champion against Bondarevsky – but in vain. One day it was announced that both Bondarevsky and I would receive gold medals and title of the national champions. Then I quietly departed on a simultaneous exhibition tour to the Urals region. I still remember very well starting to play on 201 boards in Sverdlovsk, in an attempt to set the world record. During this large-scale simul I got a telegram from Chairman Snegov. I had to return to Moscow immediately to take part in the so-called Absolute Championship of the Soviet Union. [...] I was very distressed. I had not even thought of such a tournament. In addition, I was obviously not prepared."[\[xxxv\]](#)

I was not able to find any information on the giant simultaneous display in Sverdlovsk in 1939. According to the *Soviet Chess Encyclopedia*, in Moscow 1935, Lilienthal duplicated the record of Marshall (Montreal 1922 – 155 boards). Stahlberg (Buenos Aires 1941 - 400 games) is mentioned as the next record-breaker.[\[xxxvi\]](#)

There's nothing in Lilienthal's book to be found on Botvinnik's personality. One may explain this by the fact that Lilienthal owes to Botvinnik his early "retirement" from the chess elite. It also may be hinted by his role as the coach of Smyslov and Petrosian, as well as through many years of

friendship with Keres and Bronstein (all Botvinnik's rivals). However the Russian magazine *64* recently published a report by Botvinnik's nephew Igor where the following words of Lilienthal are cited: "I liked Mikhail Moiseevich. He was an unselfish man among the world champions." [\[xxxvii\]](#)

In conclusion, I'd like to say that, despite certain inaccuracies in his memoirs, I would estimate Lilienthal's sense for chess history as considerable. His book *Chess Was My Life* is a remarkable work that will retain its value in – and for – the history of modern chess.

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## Notes

[\[i\]](#) K. Landsberger: *William Steinitz, Chess Champion*, Jefferson and London, 1993, p. 331.

[\[ii\]](#) A. Lilienthal: *Schach war mein Leben*, Frankfurt/Main, 1988, p. 5. Further citations from this book are denoted by page number only.

[\[iii\]](#) A. ••••••••: ••••• – ••••••••, ••••••, 1969.

[\[iv\]](#) A. Lilienthal: *Életem, a sakk*, Budapest, 1985.

[\[v\]](#) p. 8.

[\[vi\]](#) p. 9. Károly Sterk (1881-1946), Emil Zinner (1909-

1942).

[\[vii\]](#) p. 16. The players of Hungarian worker's team, mentioned by Lilienthal, were: Andor Lilienthal himself, Róbert Pikler (1909-1984), Sándor Boros (1907-1944), József Drucker, Vilmos (Emil?) Zinner, Ferenc Krénosz (1906-1972), Gyula Tóth (1905-1975), Géza Baráth, Emil Chevassus (Gelenczei, 1895-1890), Ödön Bedö (1887-1953), Andor Kohn, Imre Telkes (1896-1942?).

[\[viii\]](#) p. 15. Lilienthal names Ernst Grünfeld (1893-1962), Albert Becker (1896-1984), Hans Müller (1896-1971), Baldur Hönlinger (1905-1992) and Heinrich Wolf (1875-1943), whom he calls "The King of the Coffee House Players".

[\[ix\]](#) p. 67.

[\[x\]](#) p. 16. Carl Ahues (1883-1968), Kurt Richter (1900-1969), Bernhard Kagan (1866-1932).

[\[xi\]](#) On Victor Bart (1887-1954) see: John Milner: *A Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Artists 1420-1970*, Great Britain, 1993, p. 66.

[\[xii\]](#) p. 18. Boris Kostic (1887-1963), Eugene Znosko-Borovsky (1884-1954), Saviely Tartakower (1887-1956).

[\[xiii\]](#) Osip Bernstein (1882-1962), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953).

[\[xiv\]](#) p. 18.

[\[xv\]](#) *A Life for Chess*, 1969, p. 7. Géza Maróczy (1870-1951).

[xvi] p. 23. Jacques Mieses (1865-1954).

[xvii] p. 20.

[xviii] p. 44.

[xix] p. 220.

[xx] p. 40.

[xxi] p. 60.

[xxii] p. 58. Salo Landau (1903-1943).

[xxiii] p. 61. Arpád Vajda (1896-1967).

[xxiv] p. 73.

[xxv] p. 74.

[xxvi] ..... N° 5, 113, 05.03.1996. Nikolay Krylenko (1885-1938).

See: [www.prensa.spb.ru/newspapers/anomal/arts/anomal-113-19.html](http://www.prensa.spb.ru/newspapers/anomal/arts/anomal-113-19.html).

[xxvii] p. 75.

[xxviii] p. 104. Gideon Stahlberg (1908-1967).

[xxix] A. ...., . ....: ..... ..  
..... .. 1922-1936, ....., 1998 pp. 195-205.

[xxx] p. 104. Lajos Steiner (1903-1975), Vasily Panov

(1906-1973).

[[xxxix](#)] H. ....: ..... , ....., 1937, p. 140.

[[xxxix](#)] p. 92.

[[xxxix](#)] •. ....: • ..... , ....., 1992, pp. 5-6.

[[xxxix](#)] p. 113.

[[xxxix](#)] p. 134. Igor Bondarevsky (1913-1979), Isaac Mazel (1911-1943).

[[xxxix](#)] ..... . ..... , ....., 1990, p. 352.

[[xxxix](#)] •. ....: ..... • ..... See: [www.64.ru](http://www.64.ru) • 5, 2001.



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