



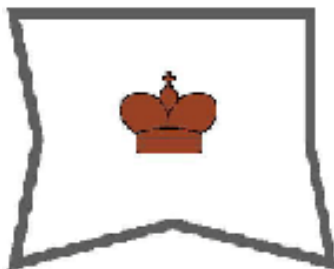
Lasker Is Coming Home

by Harald Fietz

His Thyrow summer house is destined to become a memorial; or why this former world chess champion and cosmopolitan's ideas are still relevant today.

SKITTLES
ROOM

LASKERHAUS
T H Y R O W



What was intended simply as an idea at the Lasker conference held in January 2001 is now taking practical shape. Emanuel Lasker, the second world champion in the history of chess, has been proposed to once again take a place in his former native land which he was forced to leave in the wake of the political events of 1933 when the Nazis came to power. Joint efforts between the parish of Thyrow and the Emanuel Lasker

Society have saved his now somewhat dilapidated cottage from the wrecking ball. The village with its 2,000 inhabitants is located in an attractive area, some 20 miles south of Berlin, in the Teltow-Flaeming district. The Mayor of Thyrow, Gertrud Klatt, and the Chairman of the Lasker Society, Paul Werner Wagner, have acted in collaboration in order to raise hopes that both the German and the international chess community will in the near future have the opportunity to visit a worthy memorial. Following agreement with the legal owner, the Federal Property Authority as trustee, in December 2001, the Parish of Thyrow acquired the developed site for 61,000 marks (approx. \$30,000 US). Based on a 99-year-lease, the property was given to the Lasker Society without cost. Now it is its turn to move: within the next three years the society is required to make progress on reconstructing the house which has been abandoned since 1994.

From enthusiasm to taking action

The summer house in which Lasker lived from 1923 to 1933 was rescued at the very last minute. It was the final act in an intense behind-the-scenes conflict as part of a re-purchase policy which has been an ongoing process ever since German re-unification in 1990. Clarifying ownership and property rights turned out to be the ultimate challenge in the invitation for tender. However, on 12 May 2000, Paul Werner

Wagner, a creative artist from Berlin, did not have any such issues in mind when he arose from his meditations. Returning from an appointment in Brandenburg, the region surrounding Berlin, he suddenly noticed a road sign pointing to Thyrow. He asked his colleague if she could spare the time to visit the nearby place. This detour proved to be a turning point in Paul Werner Wagner's latent enthusiasm for chess history.

In 1967-68 he fell under the influence of the international citizen Lasker. At the time, Wagner had been imprisoned by the Stasi, the East German state security service, for illegal emigration from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), in the infamous prison in Halle known as Roter Ochse (Red Ox) (for more information in German go to www.landesbeauftragte.de and see the section entitled Broschueren). Ever since Stefan Zweig's famous *Royal Game*, all chess fans have been aware of the immense moral power that can be derived from just a few pages of chess writing. The chess novel is characterised by an intellectual hold that forms an existential platform enabling a prisoner to survive when restricted freedom of movement threatens to endanger his mental state.



*Cartoon by Frank Stiefel
(source and copyright
Frank Stiefel)*

In particular Albin Poetzsch's series on Lasker in the GDR German chess magazine *Schach*, and Horst Rittner's weekly column in the sport magazine *Sport-Echo* helped a great deal. Wagner soon found his life-long heroes: the multi-faceted personality of Emanuel Lasker, on the one hand, and Victor Korchnoi, the unfortunate loser in the world championship candidature final in 1968, on the other hand. After his imprisonment Wagner, whose wife Annett Michel was the women's champion of the GDR, remained loyal to chess: both as a player for the teams of Chemie Wolfen and Rotation Berlin, as an organiser in East Berlin's sport and recreation centre and as an arbiter (e.g., in GDR national championships).

Looking back to May 2000 the visitors had some considerable luck. The first inhabitant questioned knew of the history of Lasker's summer house and guided them to the location in Wilhelmstrasse. As observant neighbours noticed what was happening they asked whether these visitors from elsewhere intended to buy the property. An idea was born: Lasker's summer house really ought to be preserved.

This was the beginning of a 19-month long struggle that started by immediately contacting the Federal Property Authority. Although the

authority already had a bid for the item in question, the staff member responsible for this deal, Marion Buechel, proved to be open-minded with regard to the chess interest and thus acknowledged the cultural dimension of the act. A brave decision, because the contract of sale was about to be signed. Only one more week, and everything would have been all over. Now the issue was to bring about the conditions for success in buying the house. An international conference seemed to be an appropriate instrument to inform the public as well as to bring together chess-related expertise. During a seven-month-period a great many deliberate and accidental contacts had been made in order to accumulate sufficient input for the conference in Potsdam (near Berlin) in January 2001. A network of experts and decision makers had been created that had one mission in mind - to activate broad interest in Lasker's work and life achievements:

Professor Julius Schoeps of the Moses Mendelssohn Center and Wolfgang Hempel of the Wilhelm Fraenger Institute, both Potsdam-based highly recognised institutions in the field of cultural history, both supported Wagner in his efforts to assemble good reasons for bidding for the house as well as for calling the conference.

With the help of a mutual friend, Wagner made contact with Dr. Ulrich Sieg of the University of Marburg. By the end of May 2000, ties had been established to a research team that had already been conducting research on Lasker since the mid-1990s. Ulrich Sieg, a FIDE master, is a key member of the team that mostly includes players from the Luebeck chess club (the current Bundesliga team champion). Together with Dr. Michael Dreyer of the University of Jena, a former Schleswig-Holstein regional chess champion, and Dr. Tim Hagemann of the University of Tuebingen, he was in the process of writing a book on Lasker. This project involving six researchers was designed to focus on all spheres of Lasker's life. In the end the project was speeded up in order to provide substantial input for the conference and to lay the ground for future research (cp. Fischer 2001 and Ree 2001).



The characteristic mono-pitch roof in Bauhaus style

Both these initiatives helped in Autumn 2000 in applying for financial support for the conference. The Federal Agency for Civic Education granted two-third of the 100,000-mark budget (approx. \$45,000 USD). The remaining third was provided by the minister in the Federal Chancellor's office for Cultural Affairs and Media, the Brandenburg regional agency for political education, the Moses Mendelssohn Center and the Wilhelm Fraenger Institute.

The Mayor of Thyrow, Gertrud Klatt, also joined this initiative in July 2000. Although she is not a chess player, as early as 1997 she tried to get support from the German Chess Association in order to save Lasker's summer house. However, these plans could not be realised due to un-resolved property rights. The issue was only settled in early 2000.

The community of Thyrow is aware of Lasker's heritage and remembers its famous inhabitant. In 1996 the parish celebrated its 650th anniversary with a street procession, and one of the floats was decorated in order to remind onlookers of Lasker's significance. In 1994 a street in a new parish district was named after Lasker, and since this time the local chess club has been organising a bi-annual Lasker chess open in co-operation with the neighbouring Ludwigsfelde chess club and Hertha 06 chess club from the Berlin district of Charlottenburg.

From summer 2000 onwards, political backing came from the chief minister of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, the Federal Minister of the Interior, Otto Schily, and Polish foreign minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski: Lasker's place of birth, Barlinek, was formerly called Berlinchen and is now part of Poland.

With effect from July 2000, Ralph Schiffmann, a well-known chess

collector, has offered to place his special Lasker items at disposal for chess research.

In mid-September 2000, just one day before Wagner would have had to submit a personal bid for the Lasker property, he met Christian Wohlfarth, an architect with a passion for the game of Go. As a successful player at national and international level, Wohlfarth has a distinctive interest in Lasker as a Go player. He was willing to support Wagner's private initiative with his professional knowledge. By the end of 2000 he had managed to discover the original building plans and has recently worked out a concept for the reconstruction.

With the help of Susanna Poldauf, author of a new biography on the life of Philidor, and sister of Berlin-based IM Dirk Poldauf, Wagner came into contact with the Chess Collectors International group. Their president, Dr. Thomas Thomsen, was among experts in the group who participated in the conference and acted as co-founder of the Emanuel Lasker Society.

The 2001 Lasker Conference turned out to be an outstanding event in the course of chess history. More than 100 people came together for three days to focus on very different fields of specialisation. The Emanuel Lasker Society was set up as a non-profit institution (charity) which has as its aims keeping alive Lasker's heritage and is also acting as a driving force in re-building Lasker's summer house. Participation by the 90-year old Andor Lilienthal, 80-year old Yuri Averbakh and 70-year old Victor Korchnoi contributed to enhance the status of the event. The conference reader (in German) will be published in Spring 2003.

Everyone's combined efforts enabled the final decision on the contract to be postponed for 15 months. In autumn 2001 cross-party consensus was reached in the town council of Thyrow and the parish was able to purchase the house in December 2001.



Lobbying started at once. On 9 December 2001 the Mayor of Thyrow invited the Brandenburg regional Minister for Cultural Affairs, Prof. Johanna Wanka, to a two-hour informational meeting. Currently the Minister is examining how the ministry can support the project.

This brief retrospective makes clear that the first stage of the reconstruction process was achieved from a zugzwang situation and that it succeeded although a great deal of scepticism was prevalent. Gertrud Klatt summarises what needs to be done now:

*Paul Werner Wagner,
the chairman
of the Lasker Society
at the VIP rapid
chess tournament
in Potsdam
during the
Lasker conference
in January 2001
(source Harald Fietz)*

“Reconstructing Lasker’s house will cost a lot of money, and I hope that we will have support from political as well as commercial spheres. In addition, the chess community world-wide can contribute to the project. The parish of Thyrow has played its financial part by purchasing the house and renting it to the Lasker Society.”
Reconstructing a listed building as a memorial and meeting place also has

another dimension – it brings back a precious item of architectural history.

Comeback of an architectural jewel in chess history

Nowadays one can travel from Berlin city centre to Thyrow once every 2 hours via regional rail. In the 1920s trains ran more frequently. Residents of the German capital loved to travel out to the surrounding areas, especially on weekends. Wealthy people often had a summer house in the undeveloped countryside. Lasker was particularly fascinated by the Teltow area. Jacques Hannak, one of his early biographers, reported that the thinker Lasker unsuccessfully tried to become an agricultural producer and had the same luck at pigeon breeding. The summer house was mainly built as a refuge to escape from the hectic life of the metropolis. However, bearing in mind Lasker’s exceptional hospitality, it cannot be ruled out that the house was also used as a chess location.

After losing the world championship, Lasker only participated in three more tournaments (Moravska Ostrava 1923, New York 1924 and Moscow 1925) before he emigrated from the Germany of the Weimar Republic. In addition, he was embittered over chess competition organisers and with his old rival Capablanca. Invitations from New York in 1927 and Carlsbad in 1929 were turned down. He devoted most of his time to card and other board games. In particular the game of Go became his passion, and in his book *Board games of the World* (*Brettspieler der Völker* - of which only the chapter on chess has been translated into English) which was published in 1931, the chapter on Go is by far the longest, even longer than that on chess! At the time he managed to narrowly beat the German Go champion, Felix Dueball, in an official game. Although not a professional, he achieved a high category, between the 2nd and 3rd kyu, and was no. 6 on the German rating list. Andor Lilienthal, now an honorary member of the Lasker Society, could not hide his disappointment when he visited Berlin in 1929. He approached Lasker in the famous Café Koenig but the king of chess preferred only to play Go.



The only existing picture of Lasker and his wife Martha in front of their summer house. (Source Kagan's Neuste Schachnachrichten 1927, No. 1b)

Lasker's wide-ranging intellect and his interest in modern trends are also revealed if one looks at the building methods for his summer house. The only available photograph (from Kagan's *Neuste Schachnachrichten* 1927) shows Lasker and his wife in front of the house with the characteristic 'hipped' walls. One can speculate that the ground plan he used symbolises the Star of David. The new Jewish Museum in Berlin and the model for Ground Zero in New York (both by Daniel Libeskind) also use such symbolism. Apart from this, Lasker's house is characterised by clear functionalism, oriented towards the Bauhaus style. Contrary to other country houses, a monopitch roof was used. So far no information on the architect is available, except for the three letters and the name Weber. The Brandenburg regional agency for historic monument protection has indicated that this type of building bears resemblance to work by the famous architect Otto Barting. Exchange of views between representatives of the agency and Christian Wohlfarth is scheduled to take place in the near future.

The former number one in the GDR's Go rating-list in 1989 had already achieved a lot with his detailed detective work. The original building plans were probably destroyed in the Potsdam city archives during World War II. However, Wohlfarth contacted the former mayor of Thyrow, Klaus Gerlach, who by pure chance had taken some photographs of a building plan that looked particularly interesting. It proved to be an extremely fortunate coincidence that this building plan is that of Lasker's house.

The house was damaged by fire in 1929 and after Lasker went into exile several owners remodelled the house (e.g., putting on an ordinary roof and changing the room layout on the ground floor). A former pavilion

that was connected to the main house via a passageway will not be reconstructed as in the mean time the Lasker property has been divided into several smaller plots. However, the original building plans will allow Lasker's summer house, which was built in a very individual style, to be reconstructed. The ground floor consisted of only one room measuring 55 square metres. In the back there was a wooden stairway leading to the first floor, which comprises a gallery, two smaller rooms and a small store-room. The house had no kitchen and no sanitation. Rudimentary toilet facilities existed in the garden. One major shortcoming is that nothing at all is known about the interior design. For obvious reasons Bauhaus style furniture may be selected. The ground floor will be used for exhibitions or small workshops. In the basement there is space to store conference equipment.

Against this background the current cost estimation on pre-planning basis amounts to a total of 336,000 euros (approx. \$350,000 US). Such a financial burden can nevertheless not be borne by the Lasker Society alone. Every chess fan can contribute to this unique project. Details of a special fundraising account will be given below.

Lasker's spirit lives on

However, reconstructing the house is not the only activity the Lasker Society undertakes. The Lasker conference revealed that much research and search for material is still required. Networking between individual researchers and also public relations work for Lasker issues are as important as the monthly chess meetings (which are also open to the general public) and simultaneous displays for prominent figures and normal club players.

After the great success of two simuls with Victor Korchnoi, another honorary member of the charity, in November 2001 (at <http://www.lasker-gesellschaft.de/harald-fietz/kortschnoi/kortschnoi.html> - in German only) the Lasker Society is planning to continue collaborating with the Casino Berlin, the gambling rooms near Alexanderplatz, a central location in the city centre. The Lasker Society's homepage is regularly updated thanks to Hubert Petermann (www.lasker-gesellschaft.de), and an Internet-based museum is currently being set up (any chess researcher on Lasker-related issues is invited to contact Andreas Saremba via e-mail at andreas.saremba@lasker-gesellschaft.de).

Ulrich Sieg, an editor of the latest book on Lasker, permits himself to give an optimistic view of the research future: "Lasker offers a lot of 'Luft' for further exploration of his intellectual environment. We hardly know anything about the people he met and those who helped him to elaborate his theories. We have some evidence which has to be expanded in painstaking and detailed work. Lasker was a 'traveller' between different cultural spheres and places, and his personal effects

and works are not available in any one place. As we prefer to look at history from different angles – an American, a German, a British etc. view – it is proving to be difficult to put together isolated findings in order to achieve a coherent picture. Actually Lasker represented an early type of universal scholar. As nowadays one has to transcend even more definitely former national concepts of history, a figure such as Lasker is becoming more interesting. In game theory Lasker's ideas are also fashionable, in particular, if they are viewed not only from the purely mathematical point of view but instead are integrated into the field of economic decision making ... With regard to his chess games it is high time for one of the world-famous grandmasters in the art of analysis, such as Speelman, Timman or Huebner, to come up with a major Lasker book. It would be even more fascinating to have two competing pieces of work, e.g., by Korchnoi and Huebner.”

It looks as if Lasker can provide great potential for acquiring new insights into chess as well as into the cultural and political backgrounds of his time. A reconstructed Lasker house would be a perfect place in which to progress with discussions on his legacy and to find new forums to bring together world-wide expertise from different fields of knowledge. The chess world can appreciate the tremendous value of the intellectual achievements of one of its greatest thinkers as per its traditional motto “gens una sumus”.

References

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Fundraising Appeal

Put up a memorial to chess tradition

Now is the time to appeal to the world-wide chess community for financial support in order to make this aim of rebuilding the memorial to Emanuel Lasker come true.

Every single person can support this project with some financial contribution, however small!

Please acknowledge the part you can play to actively contribute towards reconstructing this precious item in the cultural heritage of chess history.

Fundraising account:

Emanuel Lasker Gesellschaft e.V.
Dresdner Bank
Bank sort code: 120 800 00
Account number: 64 64 64 64
Tel.: +49.30.24.34.29.90
Internet: www:lasker-gesellschaft.de

Any donation made is tax-deductible under German law. You may also transfer to this account directly using credit or other direct-debit cards. Please include your full postal address on the bank transfer documents.



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