

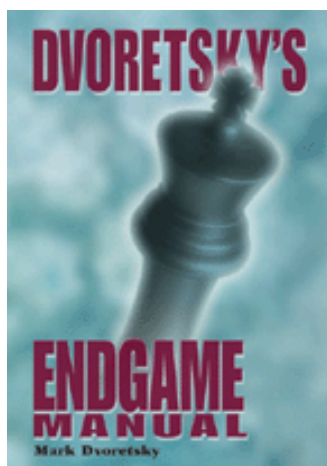


SKITTLES
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The Forgotten Tour:

Alekhine's Chess Exhibitions in Singapore - February 26, February 27 and March 27, 1933

by Olimpiu Urcan



In *Kings, Commoners and Knaves: Further Chess Explorations*, Edward Winter offers a reason why many chess researchers and historians seem both hypnotised and frustrated when dealing with Alexander Alekhine's game compilations or biography. "Among the key difficulties facing them are the intensity of his activity in numerous countries and the paucity of solid information, i.e. documentation, about certain aspects of his life..." (p.344). Try to imagine the amount of work needed to set down a complete record of an old master's life and career and tracing his games and stories worldwide! Especially if the master in question was a globetrotter such as Alekhine.

In 1933 Alekhine decided to conduct a worldwide chess tour, taking his mission as a chess champion more seriously than in the aftermath of the 1927 match against Capablanca. The Far East was the main target and some authors have tried to cover his episodes here, where he had both simultaneous and blindfold exhibitions. Some of these works were able to report the chess events from the first months of 1933. Then there are some more obscure and lesser known facts, people and events that remain in the realm of forgotten chess, an area where, from time to time, a chess historian might venture in an attempt to shed some light. The mission of a chess historian occasionally is not that of a discoverer, but of a reminder.

Alexander Alekhine's Chess Games 1902-1946 by L.M. Skinner and R.G.P. Verhoeven (1992) was not able to offer a complete insight regarding Alekhine's tour in Asia in spite of the fact that the volume contains 2,543 games. Alekhine's presence in Singapore in February 1933 is hardly mentioned. The same happens in *The Games of Alekhine* by Rogellio Caparros and Peter Lahde (1992): the authors give more insight into the champion's Far East tour by following chronicles such as *The China Press*, *The South China Morning Post*, *The China Mail* or *The Hong Kong Daily Press*. Although about 75 games are offered along

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with some notes from places where Alekhine visited, one cannot find a detailed report on Alekhine in Singapore on February 26 and 27, 1933. All these sources mention only the telegraphic notes: on February 26, Alekhine conducted a simultaneous exhibition on 25 boards collecting 25 wins. On the next day, he conducted a blindfold simul on 10 boards, winning nine and drawing one, e.g., as reported in *Alekhine in Europe and Asia* by Donaldson, Minev and Seirawan, page 80.

Some other chess journals offer significantly different information. There is common agreement that on February 27 Alekhine gave a blindfold exhibition on 10 boards but the result is different: In two days in Singapore (February 26th and 27th), Alekhine found time to give two displays (27-1-1), and a blindfold exhibition (9 wins and 1 loss). Source: *The Australasian Chess Review*, December 20, 1933, p. 307.

Moreover, the general opinion is that Alekhine left Singapore for good very soon after February 27, heading for the Dutch East Indies where he took part in more chess events. The details of his presence in Singapore at the end of February as well as the fact that he had returned to Singapore on March 27, 1933 after the Asian part of the tour was finished are not widely known even with today's complete works dedicated to Alekhine

The island of Singapore – one of the most precious pearls in the hands of the British Empire because of its strategic and economical geographical position – used to be the land of the British high society with respect to chess activity until the mid 1920s. Sports were the privilege of the rich business class or of the high functionaries of the colony. A large number of Sport Clubs had been founded at the end of the 19th century. The locals or other races could hardly be represented in such organizations but over the span of a few decades – especially after the Great War – other races and nationalities founded their own sport organizations with or without the help of the British administration, or they infiltrated the Clubs that already existed. If the Singapore Chess Club was of entirely British (i.e., Western) membership between 1897-1920, after the war, the Club would receive the higher class of the other races and people populating Singapore: Arabs, Malays, Chinese, Indians, etc.

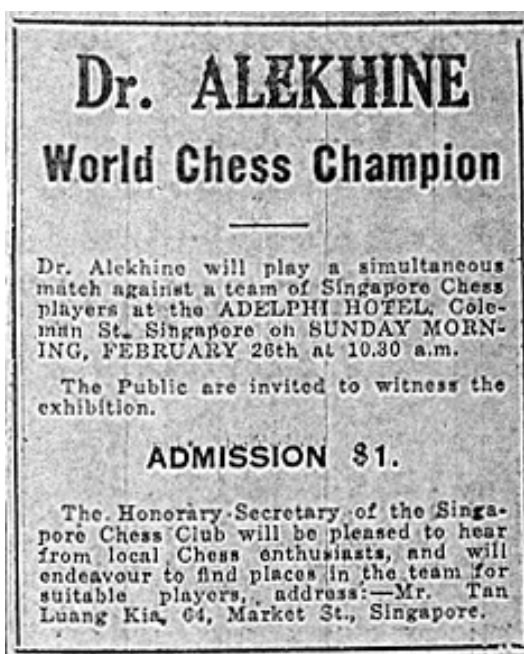
Life in Singapore during the 1920s and 1930s – labelled the Roaring Twenties in America – was not very much different than in the West. Newspaper headlines dealing with gangsters and the daily life of high-class society, Hollywood and its stars on the front pages, dramatic singers and flappers' portraits looking at us from the old pages of the journals, the art of advertising raised to new heights, extensive sport comments and the myth of the new Man and Woman, the spell of the automobile and opium, the threat of Nazis and the wish for peace. Reading the old journals and newspapers of the colony, one could feel as if one were in New York.

The world champion's visit to Singapore had been announced by an article published on February 7, 1933 in *The Straits Times* – “World's Chess Champion. Dr. Alekhine to Visit Singapore” (Alekhine's well-known biographical details have been omitted):

Dr. A.A. Alekhine, the world's chess champion will arrive in Singapore by the President Adams, and the Singapore Chess Club hope to arrange for the champion to give a simultaneous display at the Adelphi Hotel on the morning of 26. The secretary, Mr. Tan Luang Kia, of Chan Sze Can and Co., Market Street, would be pleased to receive the names of anyone interested in taking part (...) During his visit to the East he is devoting himself to a popular propaganda of chess.

The Straits Times, February 7, 1933, p.17

On February 21, a special advertisement was placed in these newspapers to promote the event. It was announced that Alekhine would conduct a simultaneous exhibition against a selected team from the Singapore Chess Club on February 26 starting at 10.30 am. The public was invited:



The Straits Times, February 21, 1933, p.5

Alekhine arrived in Singapore on February 25 as *The Malay Tribune* informed its readers:

Among the pre-eminent passengers on the Dollar Liner, the "President Adams" which arrived on Saturday, were the following: H.R.H. Princess Purchatra of Siam, returning from a visit to the Philipines Islands. Dr. Alekhine, of Paris, on a world tour. Dr. Alekhine is the world's chess champion. (...)

The Malay Tribune, February 27, 1933, p.12

On the same day, *The Malay Tribune* announced in its Sports section that:

Dr. Alekhine the world champion who is due in Singapore this weekend and will play simultaneous matches at the Adelphi Hotel on Sunday morning against a team of local players, played two exhibitions in Shanghai, at one time, against 39 opponents, losing

only one, drawing against two and beating the rest.

In Hong Kong he played two exhibitions blindfolded, playing 10 games simultaneously. Each table was against four opponents making 40 in all. He won nine and drew one game.

The Malay Tribune, February 25, 1933, p.5

A more extensive interview with the chess celebrity who was just visiting Singapore is covered by *The Straits Times* in one article called “Settling disputes by Chess! Dr. Alekhine’s Dream. A Sino-Japanese Solution”:

If Dr. Alexander Alekhine, world’s chess champion, has anything to do with it, the Sino-Japanese dispute will be settled over the chess board and the ancient game will serve to bring about closer the understanding between the East and West as well.

Dr. Alekhine arrived in Singapore from Manila by the President Adams this morning. He is to give an exhibition of the skill that enabled him to wrest the world title from Jose Capablanca at Buenos Aires in 1927, at the Adelphi Hotel tomorrow.

This is how Dr. Alekhine, who is something of a League of Nations personality himself since he was born in Russia and became a naturalized Frenchman after the Revolution, hopes to bring about a world Utopia through chess (writes a *Straits Times* reporter).

An Idea Takes Shape

‘The purpose of my visit to the East’ he revealed, ‘is primarily to study Eastern forms of chess. I have met champion exponents of the Japanese and Chinese versions of the game and they have lent me books which I intend to pursue thoroughly. I believe there is a Malay version, too, and I shall be glad to add it to my studies.

‘When I return to Paris I want to set about writing a book incorporating all the forms of chess I know and suggesting how they might be combined to make a standardised version for the world. They would be only the start of the idea, for it may even promote better understanding between the nations of the East and West over the chess board’.

‘Your efforts might lead to a peaceful studios settlement of the Sino-Japanese dispute, too?’ I ventured.

‘That’s too great to hope’, Dr. Alekhine replied with a smile. ‘It is not the work of one man but I want to give the idea a start. I like writing about chess almost as much as playing it – about its cultural importance and the opportunities it gives for the development of many faculties. It brings people together on a high intellectual plain and in that way the idea I have told you about, may, in some small amount, help the world’ (...)

No Special Training

'What are the special qualifications needed to be a world's champion apart from an immense knowledge of the game? Does one have to eat any special kind of food or train in any peculiar way? Dr. Alekhine states that all one needs is good mental and physical health. 'I don't eat quantities of mustard or anything like that,' he added.

Dr. Alekhine does not intend to play a blindfold tournament in Singapore. 'I can usually manage to cope with fifteen or twenty opponents playing that way but more than that is a great strain', he declared. From Singapore he hopes to visit the Dutch East Indies, Ceylon and India before returning to Europe (...)

The Straits Times, February 25, 1933, p.16

It is easy to guess the excitement caused by the upcoming event in the island. And yet, life went on as usual: Miss Riboet – a popular actress and singer back then – performing on stage garnering applause and favourable reviews in the island's journals, cigarette and beauty cream advertisements, the automobile and the new man – The Sportsman – coaxed out of the tennis and golf worlds by the world of fashion...

Singapore achieved the fame of an exotic place to see and people throughout the world rushed to visit. Famous people. Raffles Hotel played host to the world's new royalty, the kings and queens of Hollywood: Douglas Fairbanks, Marry Pickford visited in 1929, Will Rogers and Frank Buck came as well, the latter putting Singapore on the movie map with his film *Bring'em Back Alive*. Not to mention Wheeler and Woolsey, a pair of British comedians, who, in their day, were more popular than Laurel and Hardy. Much excitement was caused when the much-loved Charlie Chaplin and his brother arrived in Singapore in 1932 on their way to the Dutch Indies. Certainly, the Hollywood connection created the image of 'Cesspool of the East' for Singapore. Singapore was the object of fascination for movie-makers, writers, travelers, real Kings and Queens or the ones populating the screens of the newest art. The news about Nazis' unconceivable acts in Germany was the only thing that disrupted such seemingly happy times. *The Straits Times* reported Alekhine's simultaneous display on February 26 and the column was flanked by the news from a Nazi-governed Germany and the assassination attempt upon Franklin Roosevelt in the United States:

Dr. Alekhine Gives Away a Queen! And Then Disposes of 25th Opponent

For four hours, Dr. Alexander Alekhine, the world's chess champion, battled against 25 members of the Singapore Chess Club at the Adelphi Hotel yesterday, and in winning all the games demonstrated that uncanny skills which enabled him to beat Capablanca for the world's title in 1927.

The match was watched by a small but attentive gathering of

enthusiasts.

Dr. Alekhine compelled most of his opponents to resign in something under thirty moves making twenty-five moves at twenty-five boards while they made one.

One game he ended up in fourteen moves.

Mrs. Joh and Mrs. Tan Hock San, the only two woman players, were not easily confounded by the champion, but Dr. Alekhine was merciless with men and women alike and gradually broke up all attacks.

Mr. Ramnath Singh was the last to finish. Excitement at this board was intense when Dr. Alekhine gave away a valuable Queen and won even then. Mr. W.A.N. Battenberg, the lawyer, and Mr. J.H. Kortwright, of the Chattered Bank, also gave the champion very good fights.

‘He is a player!’ enthusiastically commented Mr. Tan Luang Kia, the secretary of the Club, to a Straits Times reporter. ‘ Dr. Alekhine says that we have provided him with the strongest opposition since he left Europe but I think he is being very modest. Anyway he was far beyond any of us’.

The following Club Members took part in the match: George Parbury, Tan Luang Kai, M. Maschoieff, B.O. Wilmot, C.G. Paterson, F.C. Peck, R. Jumabhoy, Kiong Chin Eng, Syed Ibrahim Alsagoff, Jee Ah Chian, H. Vogel, P. Kohler, J. Harvie, Ramnath Singh, Yeoh Bok Choon, Lee Choon Eng, Kortwright, Ralph Townsend, W.A.N. Battenberg, Lo Kam Woon, P.W.F. Mills, C.H. Coshan, Alexander Westenberg, Mrs. Joh Hahn-Butter and Mrs. Tan Hock San.”

The Straits Times, February 27, 1933, p. 14

More details of the event were covered by *The Malay Tribune* the same day:

A fair number of people saw Dr. Alekhine, the world’s chess champion, play 25 simultaneous games against local players in the Adelphi Hotel yesterday (...). Two ladies, a European and a Chinese, took part and the Chinese lady stuck it longer.



DR. ALEKHINE explaining a difficult problem to a fair competitor, at the Chess Exhibition at the Adelphi on Sunday.

Alekhine giving the simul at the Adelphi Hotel

The tournament lasted from 10.30 a.m. to 2 p.m., when Dr. Alekhine, able to sit down for the first time, checkmated Ram Nath Singh in a few moves.

Dr. Alekhine had expected to be finished earlier. He was impressed by the opposition organised by the Singapore Chess Club and congratulated several of the players. (...)

He is very charming and cultured man – tall and deep-chested – being a fine horseman, swimmer and tennis player. One of his principal indoor hobbies (chess can hardly be considered his hobby) is bridge(...).

He was greatly surprised by the cosmopolitan nature of his opposition that morning – English, French and other Europeans, Euroasian, Chinese and Indians. It was unique in his experience. There was probably no other chess club in the world like the Singapore Chess Club.

Mr. Tan Luang Kai, secretary, was responsible for the very efficient arrangements. Records of most of the games were kept for the reference of the members.

Dr. Alekhine left today for the Dutch Indies”.

The Malay Tribune, February 27, 1933, p.10



A group photo of Dr. Alekhine and the members of the Singapore Chess Club.
Alekhine and Singapore Chess Club members

The chess story of the world chess champion in Singapore does not end here as many modern authors think. In our archival research we were not able to find any reference to a chess exhibition by Alekhine on February 27. This was his departure day and it is highly improbable he would have hurriedly given an exhibition (especially a blindfold one). The old journals of the Island cover very well the other events but there is no word so-called blindfold display on the 27th. Modern sources perpetuate some confusion as a result of information in some old chess journals which were very distant from the action and didn't get dates or results correct. The February 27 event actually took place one month later!

Alekhine went for an extensive tour in the Indonesian islands during March of 1933. It seemed that Singapore had had its chance to meet the Champion and the hope for another world tour would have seemed baseless considering the modes of transportation then. And yet, *Singapore Free Press* offered a nice surprise to the Singaporean chess lovers. Here is an advertisement published on March 20:



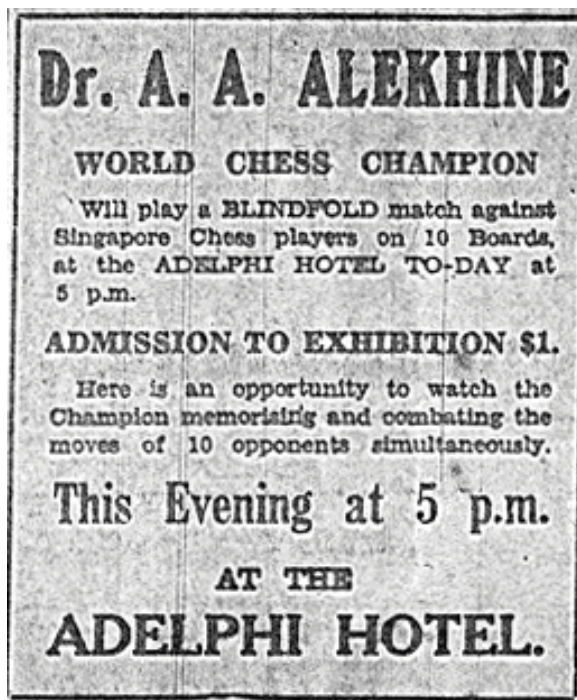
Singapore Free Press, March 20, 1933, p.2

A blindfold exhibition on 10 boards offered by Alekhine had been announced on March 27 starting in the afternoon. *The Malay Tribune* supplemented the advertisement:

Dr. Alekhine Revisiting Singapore Again

Singapore enthusiasts will have another opportunity of witnessing the world champion in action against local players next week. Dr. Alekhine, who was here recently, will re-appear at the Adelphi Hotel next Monday (March 27) at 5 p.m. when he will play blindfold against ten opponents simultaneously. The charge for admission will be \$1”.

The Malay Tribune, March 20, 1933, p.10



Singapore Free Press, 27 March 1933, p. 2

Singapore Free Press offered the attendance list from the Singapore Chess Club on March 27:

The Singapore chess players who will meet Dr. Alekhine in the blindfold match at the Adelphi Hotel today are as follows: G. Parbury, A.A. Gossevsky, Wing Commander P.B. Hunter R.A.F, Syed Ibrahim Alsgoff, Jee Ah Chian, Yap Ah Yin, R. Jumabhoy, Ramnath Singh, H.C. Coshan and Kiong Chin Eng (reserve) .

Singapore Free Press, March 27, 1933, p.16

(Note: G. Parbury would be replaced with Kiong Chin Eng.)

Notice how many players who had met Alekhine one month before were back to have their chance again. It is also interesting to note that Hunter was the leading chess player of the British Royal Air Force stationed in Singapore, while other players' names were not necessarily any less familiar. For instance, Syed Ibrahim bin Omar Alsgoff was a respected Arab gentleman who, in 1929, had been appointed as Member of Mahommedan Advisory Board in Singapore and in 1936 had been appointed as Justice of the Peace. He had previously been invested with high orders by King Hussein of Hejdaz. At the time of the simul, he was a respectable businessman and a public, influential person.

Rajabali Jumabhoy's name carries significance to Singaporeans even today. Not for chess reasons, but for his large estates and dynastical disputes; he was an influential Indian public figure who established himself as one of the leading activists in Singapore's public life.

Ramnath Singh – who at Alekhine's last simultaneous display managed to create some trouble over the board – was back again as well. However, the surprise didn't come from the previous participants, but from Yap Ah Yin.

One day after the event there was the following report:

World Champion Wins Nine Out of Ten Blindfolds Games

Dr. Alekhine, world chess champion, played 'blindfold' games against ten opponents, simultaneously, at the Adelphi Hotel yesterday evening. It was a return visit after his tour of the Dutch East Indies and today he left for Europe.

The chess champion was not actually blindfolded but sat in a chair with his back to his opponents. Their moves were announced to him and he called out his moves in reply . (...) Dr. Alekhine beat nine of his opponents but retired against Yap Ah Yin, of the Straits Chinese Recreation Club who had a Queen, a Rook and a Knight against a Queen and a Rook. It was an unusual demonstration of mental concentration.

Dr. Alekhine is one of the most delightful and chatty of fellows away from the chess table. He conversed freely after the games, as though he had no mental strain, and paid the Singapore Chess Club a great compliment saying that they had provided him the strongest opposition in the Far East".

The Malay Tribune, March 28, 1933, p.10

The Far East, the object of European's fantasies and utopian projections but equally a land unknown to Westerners. Alekhine's tour here came to an end although the Australians persisted with their attempt to persuade him to visit Australia as well. The negotiations failed since Alekhine never replied to an invitation cabled to him during the night of February 15/16, 1933 and which was kept for him in Singapore. Here is Australians' sad tone:

"Where is Alekhine now? He has toured Japan, Hong Kong, the Malay States, Java, and by this time presumably India. No direct news has reached us, and we only hope he has not fallen into the hands of Malay pirates!" Source: *The Australasian Chess Review*, June 20, 1933, p.145

Well, Alekhine was already far away from Malay pirates at that time. He had returned to Europe.

Edward Winter comments: "[Alekhine] became such an active player, tireless globetrotter and prolific annotator that in-depth researching of his career must have been an uncommonly gruelling task." (*Kings, Commoners and Knaves*, p. 349). True. It certainly should be gruelling enough when the efforts of chess

historians are not coordinated and a mutual exchange of ideas is not possible.

This article is the work of a Reminder – recollecting the past eras of chess into an area too often thrown behind the “nothing really happened in chess in that area until recently” – a formula applied to Asian chess. We hope our future book on Singaporean Chess History will change that trend.

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