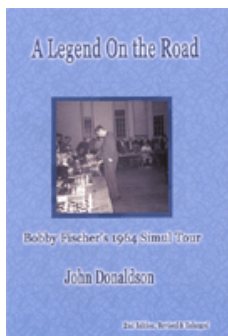




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



CHESSTHEATRE

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A Plaque for Tartakower

My chess stroll in Paris starts as usual in the Jardin du Luxembourg, at the northwest corner, near the Orangerie Museum. The chess tables stand ready, but only one man is sitting there, probably waiting for an opponent. It's not yet midday and like everywhere, chess players here are not early risers. Later in the day all tables will be occupied.

We go on to the chess shop Variantes in the rue St. André des Arts, near the Place St. Michel. My wife will always gladly leave me on my own there, as nearby there is an indispensable dress store where she can well do without my guidance. Her only worry is that the springtime collection will not have arrived yet.

Variantes has an international stock of books that one can find everywhere, but they also have some local products, French novels with chess content or philosophical and sociological books about chess. You have to ask for a stool to climb on to reach the highest shelf, where the books are that almost nobody asks for. Usually I find something interesting there.

There is a notice board in the shop with advertisements for chess lessons and announcements of tournaments. Something is missing this time. There used to be announcements of weekly rapid tournaments that were held in a Chinese restaurant, but now they are gone. A year earlier I had heard through the grapevine that the Chinese organiser had duly collected the entrance fees, but had neglected to pay the prizes to the winners.

It is a pity. Through the years it had been my intention to take part in one of these blitz or rapid tournaments, but I never did and now it seems that this business has closed.

In fact it is not easy in Paris to find places to play chess. Clubs have closed, one popular chess café was burnt down and others have apparently thrown out their chessplaying customers. Except for some clubs at the outskirts of the city the only place left seems to be the Luxembourg park.

My wife and I meet halfway between the chess shop and the dress shop. Indeed, the spring collection had not yet arrived, but there had been a winter dress, offered at such a bargain that one would be a thief of one's own wallet to let it go by.

Both happy with the things we bought we walk on. Nearby is a 'bouquinist,' a bookseller with a stall on the bank of the Seine specialising in chess. I know that he will have some interesting old books, but I also know that they will be beyond my budget, so this time we will pass him by.

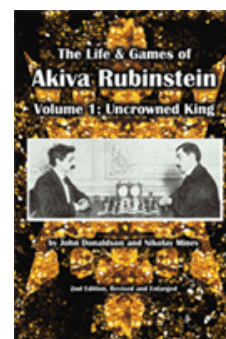
Next stop is the rue Lafayette. My wife will go to the department store of that name and I will visit another bookshop, Le Damier de l'Opéra. The name means 'the checkerboard of the Opera,' but it is mainly a chess shop.

"Such a handsome man," says my wife when through the shop window she sees a poster of Capablanca. That's what women always were saying when he was still alive.

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So far this has been my normal chess stroll whenever I visit Paris, but this time I will add a small pilgrimage. In the past I have visited Alekhine's grave at the Montparnasse cemetery. Now I would like to see how Kramnik is living, but I don't know his address. Anyway, I would have hesitated to go there, for what if he suddenly came out and saw me prying there, as an obnoxious gutter journalist invading his privacy?

This time I'll go after Savielly Tartakower, one of my heroes. From Edward Winter's website I have learned that already in 1929 Tartakower was living at the Hotel Mazagran, 4 rue Mazagran, and that he stayed there until the end of his life.

When I was young the idea of living in a hotel appealed to me greatly, but then I always imagined a hotel that was more luxurious than the rather simple Mazagran.

Hein Donner's biographer Alexander Münninghoff relates that in 1952 Donner and his girlfriend at the time Olga paid a visit to Tartakower and that they were rather shocked by the great man's physical decay and by the humble room he lived in.

Maybe Tartakower chose his lodgings because the rue Mazagran runs into the rue de l'Echiquier, Chessboard Street, but more likely he was attracted by the prices of the rooms, which are still quite moderate for Paris. In his heyday Tartakower was earning good money, but much of it went to the casino tables.



Savielly Tartakower

We enter the hotel lobby to ask if someone there still knows something about Xavier Tartacover, the name he adopted in France. The receptionist knows nothing, for which she cannot be blamed as she has obviously been born after Tartakower's death.

But she appreciates the fact that foreigners are inquiring about a hotel resident who seems to have been famous, and she is very helpful. She promises that she

will make her own inquiries, but we'll have to give her a few weeks time, as it probably will not be easy.

The hotel has had many different owners, she says. A Jew, a Chinese, a Moroccan and now an Algerian. "The Jew seems the best chance to me," I say and she agrees.

I sing the praise of the great Tartakower and tell her that the hotel should place a memorial plaque, as many hotels do for famous residents of the past: "Here lived and worked from 1929 till 1956 Xavier Tartacover (1887-1956), chessplayer, writer and poet."

She finds it an excellent idea and so, if the new Algerian owner is interested in chess or Russian poetry, I think that plaque will adorn the Hotel Mazagran in the near future.

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