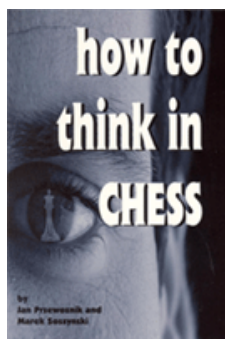




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



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Chess in Alaska

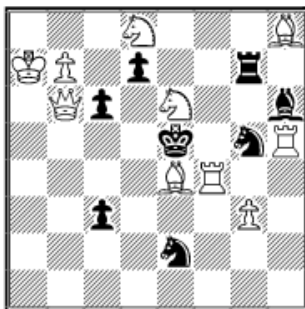
At the start of Michael Chabon's acclaimed novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which appeared in 2007, a man is found shot through the head in a shabby hotel room in Alaska.

He has registered under the name of Emanuel Lasker. In the room there is a beat-up copy of Siegbert Tarrasch's famous [Three Hundred Chess Games](#) and a chessboard with a position that is described like this: "It looks like he had a game going, a messy-looking middle game with Black's king under attack at the center of the board and White having the advantage of a couple of pieces."

Black's king in the middle of the board while White has a few pieces more. This seems an ideal situation for White that can only arise between very weak players. Does that fit with a man who has made a thorough study of Tarrasch's book?

Later we are to learn that it actually does fit, as the position turns out not to be from a game, but a problem position. Chabon has used one of Vladimir Nabokov's problems, the one that he describes in his book of memoirs *Invitation of a Memory*. In his author's note Chabon, an admirer of Nabokov, calls him affectionally 'Reb Vladimir Nabokov.'

For the few who have never seen that problem, here it is.



Mate in 2.

The try is 1.b8N, which is refuted by 1...c2. This leads to the real solution, **1.Bc2**, after which Black is in *zugzwang*, a condition in which the murdered man considered himself to be near the end of his life.

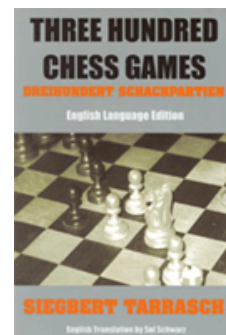
Chabon's book is set in a fictional world in which history has taken a slightly

different course than in our universe. In Alaska there is a semi-autonomous Jewish district called Sitka – a place of refuge for European Jews during World War II – where Yiddish is the official language. There are some big differences but also similarities with our world.

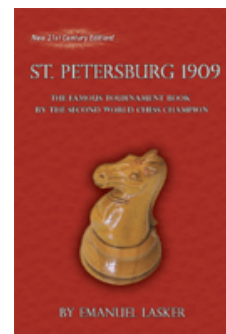
We have seen that Lasker and Tarrasch, whose careers happened before the split between Chabon's universe and ours, have kept their prominent position, and also a much younger player from our world, born after the split, briefly appears: In 1980 Jan Timman loses a World Championship match in St. Petersburg – the demise of the Soviet Union occurs much earlier in Chabon's universe – against one of the Jews from Sitka, a certain Melekh Gaystick, who later will commit suicide.

In this fictional Jewish district chess players seem to have a hard life. There is the murdered 'Emanuel Lasker,' a highly gifted heroine addict who cannot live with the expectations of his admirers who see him as the Messiah. Two other members of the local Einstein chess club have committed suicide. The detective who will solve the crime has played chess as a child, but has come to hate the game as a drug for gifted people

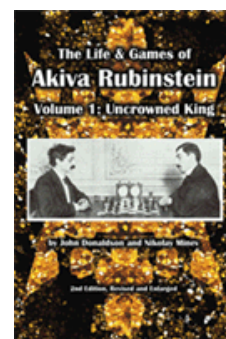
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bent on wasting their lives.

Another chess player, the voiceless criminal Alter Litvak, scribbles insults on paper notes, just as – according to Denker and Parr in their book *The Bobby Fischer I Knew* – in real life the American coffeehouse legend George Treysman used to do.

After reading about these sad fictional chess players I wondered if there is chess in the real Alaska. In the Netherlands one doesn't hear much about it.



IM Bryan Smith

Photo: [US Chess League](#)

I found that IM Bryan Smith is considered by Jaan Ehlvest to be the best chessplayer ever from Alaska. Smith is now living in Philadelphia, working as a chess professional. There is certainly chess life in Alaska, but maybe not enough to sustain a professional player.

Bryan Smith – Gregory Braylovsky

World Open, Philadelphia 2001

Sicilian Defense [B80]

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 d6 4.d4 cxd4 5.Nxd4 e6 6.Be3 Nf6 7.Qd2 Ng4 8.Bg5 Qb6 9.Ndb5 Qa5 10.Be2 a6 11.Na3 Nge5 12.f4 Ng6 13.Nc4 Qc7 14.f5



As a result of the wanderings of Black's knight, White has obtained a strong attack at an early stage.

14...Nge5 15.0-0 b5 16.fxe6

A strong sacrifice. For Black it is not attractive to decline it, as after 16...fxe6 he would be unable to castle short and after 16...Bxe6 17.Nce3, White would have a clear positional advantage.

16...Nxc4

The other way to accept the sacrifice was somewhat better, though after 16...bxc4 17.exf7+ Nxf7 18.Nd5 Qb7 19.Bxc4, White would have ample compensation.

17.Bxc4 f6

Here 17...bxc4 18.exf7+ would be very good for White.

18.Nd5 Qb7 19.Rxf6

Considering Black's disorganised position it is no surprise that it can be taken by storm with a rook sacrifice.

19...gxf6 20.Nxf6+ Kd8 21.Nd5+ Ke8 22.Rf1 bxc4

The dying man is allowed to eat anything, as they used to say in my chess coffeehouse.

23.Rf7 Be7



Now 24.Nxe7 Bxe6 25.Nf5 would probably be good enough, but the move actually played is much stronger and clearer.

24.Rxe7+ Qxe7

24...Nxe7 25.Nf6+ Kd8 26.Qxd6+ Bd7 27.Nd5 would be hopeless for Black.

25.Nxe7 Nxe7 26.Bxe7 Kxe7

For the moment Black has enough material for the queen, but he cannot keep it.

27.Qg5+ Ke8 28.Qh5+ Kd8 29.Qd5 Ra7 30.Qd4

Always pleasing to the eye, this geometrical motif. White wins a Rook.

30...Re7 31.Qxh8+ Kc7 32.Qd4 Rxe6 33.Qxc4+

Black should have resigned here, but kept on fighting till move 64. White won.