



C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

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An Unbridled Life

Among the Dutch chess champions were many gifted people, but none such a treasure of wonders, good and bad, as Jan Esser, the champion of 1913. I have written about him before (in an article collected in my book *The Human Comedy of Chess*), but recently a new biography of Esser taught me many new things and brought the man to life. It is in Dutch, but I cannot imagine that it will not be translated into other languages: *Het tomeloze leven van Johannes Esser. Grondlegger van de plastische chirurgie*, by Ton Neelissen. (The Unbridled Life of Johannes Esser, Founder of Plastic Surgery).

Anyway, for English speakers there is still the book by Dr. Barend Haeseker from 1983, *Dr. J.F.S. Esser and his Contributions to Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*. Though written as a medical dissertation, it is also quite fascinating for the layman. But I suppose it will be hard to find.

Jan Esser (1877-1946) was Dutch chess champion, chess columnist, president of the Dutch chess federation for a short time and founder of several chess clubs. He was an enthusiastic match player and once beat Janowski 2-1. But his most



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remarkable achievements were not in chess. He was a man who wanted to be the best in every field he touched and to a large extent he succeeded in this. Still, his most ambitious scheme became a failure and he died in poverty and isolation, his pioneering efforts forgotten and neglected.

While still living in the Netherlands as a general medical practitioner, his house became a meeting place of artists and intellectuals and his friendship with several of the greatest Dutch artists was to be the foundation of his career as one of the greatest private art collectors that the Netherlands has ever known. Just one example, given in Neelissen's book: at a time that Piet Mondriaan, who was to become the most famous Dutch artist of the 20th century, was still virtually unknown, Esser already possessed 70 of his works. Many Dutch museums possess works donated by Esser, some of them are the crown jewels of their collection.

Esser was also a shrewd financial speculator, who bought and sold castles, palaces, theatres and grand hotels as easily as if they were toy buildings from Legoland. He was a farmer, horse-breeder, builder, hotel manager, operator of a vaudeville house, but all these were only side-activities to his practical and theoretical work as a pioneer of plastic surgery.

This by the way was a term that Esser abhorred, because it suggested trivial cosmetic operations for the idle rich. From time to time he did not feel above making some easy money that way, but his real work was quite different: he gave new faces

and a bearable life to the victims of battles or of terrible accidents whose faces had exploded.

The beginning of his spectacular career as a "structive surgeon" - the term invented by Esser - was in World War I. At first he had offered his services to the French and British governments, who were not interested, and so in 1915 he went to the other side, the German and Austrian empires. With him he took four Dutch nurses, recruited from the staff of a rival Dutch surgeon who was not at all pleased. Accommodating the wishes of others was never to be a consideration in Esser's grand schemes.

From Brünn (nowadays the Czech Brno) where he arrived in 1915, he moved to Vienna, then to Budapest and finally to Berlin, where he became quite famous. A Dutch newspaper reported in 1918 that the Emperor's sister in law, the Duchess of Sleswijk-Holstein-Coburg, took part in his operations as an assistant and that the Empress visited his clinic and conversed with his patients.

Esser performed thousands of operations and developed many new techniques, which he was to describe later in books and scientific articles. As Neelissen writes, some of these techniques were to be reinvented about fifty years later by American surgeons who had no idea that Esser had ever existed.

He left Berlin in 1924, fleeing the German tax inspector, and after some years of frenetic traveling

through Europe, he settled in 1926 with his three children - his first wife had died a year before - in a derelict French castle. The years to come would be devoted to a splendid ideal: a Free State of reconstructive surgery, with himself as head of state, where the millions of tortured invalids would find healing. It sounded like an impossible dream and indeed it would never become reality, but Esser came a long way.

Supported by prestigious scientists and scholars from all over the world, Albert Einstein among them, he negotiated with the Spanish government, with Mussolini in Italy and finally with the Greek dictator Metaxas to find the territory for his independent mini-state. Metaxas provided a Greek warship to enable Esser to make a tour through the Greek archipelago to find an island that suited him. He found one, but then the deal fell through because Metaxas demanded the presence of one Greek policeman on the island, as a symbol of Greek sovereignty. Esser could not give in, as he never could give in to any demand from others.

World War I had made his fame, which between the wars he squandered in pursuit of an impossible dream, and World War II was to be his undoing.

In 1939, when France and Germany were already at war, but not yet fighting, Esser left for the US.

There he didn't get permission to practice surgery. His theoretical contributions to the field were forgotten. He lost practically all his money at the New York Stock Exchange and the banker Baruch

said that never in his life had he seen someone lose so much money so quickly and bear it so stoically. Theoretically Esser was still a rich man, but his possessions were in Europe, locked in art, real estate and a maze of about a hundred companies that he had founded.

He found solace in working on a Theory of Everything that would unite all fields of learning and surpass Darwin and Einstein.

An FBI agent that investigated his case because there had been rumors that Esser was a German spy, described him as "on the verge of being nuts", but the American professor of philosophy Paul Arthur Schilpp later wrote to Esser's son that neither privately nor professionally had he ever met a man of Esser's intelligence, except Einstein.

Esser's health deteriorated and in 1946 he died of heart failure. He got a pauper's funeral.

There was something he had in common with that other Dutch chess champion, Max Euwe. They both were fanatics of work, never having an idle moment. But in many respects they couldn't have been more different.

Euwe was a standard of decency, always willing to work together with others and help them. Esser was a loner, often cold and callous.

He is known to have left patients in the midst of a long-term series of operations, leaving them much worse than they were before. Though enormously

rich he behaved often as a real miser, in one case letting a trusting friend and helper die of poverty.

He exploited the workers that he brought from Holland to his French castle so much that at one time a violent insurrection was threatened. With his first and second wife and his six children he mainly communicated by letter, giving orders. As his second wife once said to one of their children: "He was a fantastic man, but so difficult to live with." But a fantastic man he was.

Esser's most famous game was a loss against the brilliant Hungarian experimental truth-seeker Gyula Breyer, played in a small tournament in Budapest in 1917. It is also one of Breyer's most famous games, because of the mysterious King's move that prompted some spectators to argue that now Breyer had really gone mad.

White: *Breyer* Black *Esser* Budapest 1917

1. d2-d4 d7-d5 2. c2-c4 c7-c6 3. e2-e3 Ng8-f6 4. Nb1-c3 e7-e6 5. Bf1-d3 Bf8-d6 6. f2-f4 0-0 7. Ng1-f3 d5xc4 8. Bd3-b1 b7-b5 9. e3-e4 Bd6-e7 10. Nf3-g5 Threatening 11. e5 Nd5 12. Qc2 g6 13. h5 11...h7-h6 11. h2-h4 g7-g6 12. e4-e5 h6xg5 He can't prevent the opening of the h-file, for after 12...Nd5 comes 13. h5 hxg5 14. hxg6 with an overwhelming attack. **13. h4xg5 Nf6-d5**



14. Ke1-f1 In his book *Gyula Breyer Iván Bottlik* writes (I translate from the German): "With this King's move he floats like a yogi away from earthly dimensions and crosses the boundaries of that which is

logically conceivable."

The move is indeed deep, but is it objectively good? The reason behind it is that the direct mating attack would fail to a check given by Black: 14 Qg4 Kg7 15. Rh7+ Kxh7 16. Qh5+ Kg7 17. Qh6+ Kg8 18. Bxg6 fxg6 19. Qxg6+ Kh8 20. Qh6+ Kg8 21. g6 (White should take the draw here) 21?Bh4+ followed by 22...Qe7.

Dvoretsky has tried to prove that in the diagrammed position White has a forced win by 14. Bd2, the main idea being 14...Nxc3 15. Bxc3 Qe8 16. d5 cxd5 17. f5. He may well be right, but in the maze of variations some things are still unclear to me.

14...Nd5xc3 15. b2xc3 It has been written that White would win by force with 15. Qg4 Qxd4 16. bxc3, but I don't see the win after 16...Qd8.

15...Bc8-b7 Now Breyer's idea succeeds splendidly. Better was 15...Nd7. Then White still has a draw after 16. Qg4 Kg7 17. Rh7+, but if he tries to win in this line by playing g6 (as in the note to White's 14th move), Black would turn the tables

with Rxf4+ followed by Nf8.

After 15...Nd7 16. Be3 White would be threatening mate again, because his Queen's Rook is ready to take part in the attack, but Black can defend by 16...Qe8.

And what if Black plays 15...Qe8 at once? Then there isn't even a perpetual for White, who would have to pursue his attack by slow means and with a very doubtful outcome.

16. Qd1-g4 Now there is no good defence for Black anymore. **16...Kg8-g7 17. Rh1-h7+ Kg7xh7 18. Qg4-h5+ Kh7-g8 19. Bb1xg6 f7xg6 20. Qh5xg6+ Kg8-h8 21. Qg6-h6+ Kh8-g8 22. g5-g6 Rf8-f7 23. g6xf7+ Kg8xf7 24. Qh6-h5+ Kf7-g7 25. f4-f5 e6xf5 26. Bc1-h6+** Some sources say that Black resigned here because of 26...Kh7 27. e6, which would indeed win quickly.

26...Kg7-h7 27. Bh6-g5+ Kh7-g8 28. Qh5-g6+ Kg8-h8

Other sources have Black resign at this point because of 29. Bf6+ Bxf6+ 30. exf6 Qg8 31. Dh5+ Qh7 32. Qe8+ Qg8 33. f7. But Bottlik's book gives the real conclusion of the game, a sad anti-climax. Time trouble could spoil a masterpiece even before FIDE's time. At one stage Esser was even winning, but in the end Fate rewarded the daring Breyer.

29. Qg6-h6+ Kh8-g8 30. Qh6-e6+ Kg8-f8 31. Qe6xf5+ Kf8-g7 32. Bg5-h6+ Kg7xh6 33. Kf1-e2 Bb7-c8 34. Ra1-h1+ Be7-h4 35. e5-e6 Qd8-e7 36.

Qf5-f4+ Kh6-g7 37. Rh1xh4 Qe7xe6+ 38. Ke2-d2 Nb8-a6 39. Rh4-h5 Qe6-f6 40. Rh5-h7+ Kg7xh7 41. Qf4xf6 Bc8-g4 42. Qf6-h4+ Kh7-g7 43. Qh4xg4+ Kg7-f6 44. Qg4-f3+ Kf6-e7 45. Qf3xc6 Ra8-g8 46. Qc6xa6 Rg8xg2+ 47. Kd2-c1
Black resigned.

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