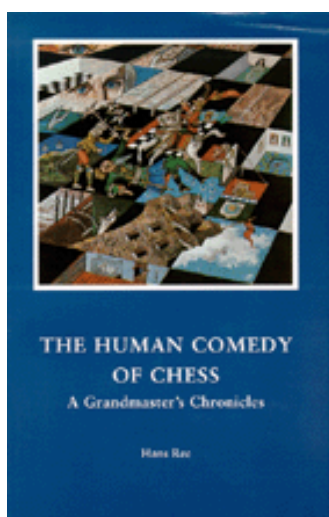




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Tartakower's Poetry

By the *International Chess Calendar* produced by our **ChessCafe** host Hanon Russell I was reminded that fifty years ago Savielly Tartakower died on February 5. For me any pretext is good enough to write something about Tartakower, who was an admirable man – a great player, a diligent and witty writer and journalist, a Doctor of Law, a poet in three languages, a music critic, a courageous soldier and according to all accounts always a man of honor.

In an earlier article (Revenge and Forgiveness, May 1999) I related that during the Victory Tournament in London in 1946 Tartakower was the only participant who defended Alekhine. A committee presided by Euwe had been set up as a kind of tribunal to judge the case of Alekhine, who by his series of anti-semitic articles had become an outcast.

Tartakower found the vengeful attitudes of his colleagues hypocritical, as they had all known about Alekhine's anti-semitism already before the war and never protested. According to Arnold Denker in *The Bobby Fischer I Knew*, Tartakower even started to collect some money for Alekhine, who was supposed to be living in poverty.

Both Tartakower's parents had been killed in a Russian pogrom. At the outbreak of World War II Tartakower had managed to reach England from Paris and he had joined DeGaulle's army of the Free French. His attitude towards the Nazis was beyond suspicion.

Though I find it hard to agree with Tartakower on Alekhine's case, his attitude, standing alone against the rightful indignation of his colleagues, seems admirable to me. "Tartakower was never a joiner," commented Euwe later, which I consider a great compliment.

In the list of Tartakower's accomplishments I mentioned that he was a poet. Until recently, the only thing I knew about his poetry came from the Dutch journalist E. Straat, who wrote in his wonderful collection *Praatschaak 1*:

"There sat Tartakower – Dr. Savielly Tartakower, Russian, Austrian, later Xavier Tartacover, Polish, French, by origin a lawyer and a chessmaster who wrote music criticism for the *Wiener Abendzeitung*, or whatever that newspaper was called at the time - translating a new poetry collection by German expressionists (Kurt Pinthus' *Menschheitsdaemmerung*) into Russian, while at the same time he was defending and drawing a subtle knight ending against Euwe. The translation was

perfect according to experts; the way in which Tartakower handled his fragile endgame against Euwe was faultless according to our Max.”

Recently one of Edward Winter's columns on www.chesshistory.com (C.N. 4089, January 9) was devoted to Tartakower's poetry. It was in fact a contribution by the chess historians Richard Foster and Tomasz Lissowski, who referred to earlier articles by Sergei Voronkov and Yuri Arkhipov in the Russian chess press.

It seems that Russian poetry critics were less impressed by Tartakower's poetry than the experts invoked by Straat. In 1911 a small book of poetry by Tartakower was reviewed by Nikolai Gumilev, a respected poet and critic. Gumilev was one of the founders of the 'acmeist' movement, of which Anna Akhmatova (who was briefly married to Gumilev) is the most famous representative. Gumilev was executed in 1921 on the charge that he had been involved in an anti-Bolshevik plot.

In 1911 Gumilev called Tartakower a true poet, with focused thoughts and great inner strength. However he went on saying: “But he has no feeling for the Russian language; worse still, he does not know it! His syntax is impossible, his vocabulary preposterous.” And he concluded that Tartakower would do better to write his poems in Yiddish, which seems a low blow.

Was Tartakower really so ignorant of Russian? I wondered if Gumilev's opinion could have been caused by a clash of poetic styles.

From Straat I knew that Tartakower had translated the German expressionists, a movement in which the blowing up of ordinary syntax and the invention of a 'preposterous' vocabulary was commonplace. Maybe Tartakower, the hypermodernist in chess, had done something similar in his own poetry, not out of ignorance, but on purpose. But as I had never seen one of his poems, this little theory had no support.

Forster and Lissowski note that later Vladimir Nabokov reviewed a small volume by 'Rewokratrat' (Tartakower in reverse), reaching the cruel verdict: “Write, but do not think it is poetry.”

The only poetry book by Tartakower that I could obtain on short notice is *Das Russische Revolutionsgesicht* (The Russian face of revolution) published in 1923. The cover text says 'Russland lacht und klagt...' (Russia laughs and cries...) and the author is called Saviely Tartakower, while inside the book he is always Savielly with two l's.

It is (apart from two prose pieces) an anthology of modern Russian poetry translated by Tartakower into German and preceded by a long essay. To a layman like me the essay seems knowledgeable and perceptive. But what about the poems?

Tartakower repeatedly indicates that his translations have the same meter as the Russian originals. Apparently when the originals rhymed, his translations rhyme also. These are severe constraints on a poetry translator and it seems to me that the Russian poems in this translation are victimised on a Procrustes bed.

Especially the incessant rhyming doesn't seem natural. Everything becomes a bit folksy, as in light verse in which clumsy rhyming is accepted and sometimes even pursued for comical effect. But this isn't supposed to be light verse.

It may be an unfair judgment, because I don't know the original poems. But Tartakower also translated one Russian poem by himself. If that is not good poetry in German, it's all his own fault.

I think it is not very good. This poem called *Iwan*, which should have been an elegy on the bloodshed in Petersburg caused by the revolution and the civil war, strikes me as a rather primitive didactic tract on the evil of violence and the virtue of forgiveness. Again the forced rhyming is irritating.

Alas, based on this admittedly small piece of evidence I must agree with Nabokov's verdict: write, but do not think it is poetry. It's a pity, because I would have liked my hero Tartakower to be a good poet also. But you can't have everything.

As an afterthought: Forster and Lissowski translate a poem by Tartakower that describes his feelings when he received a telegram saying that his parents had been killed. This poem seems much better to me, maybe because this translation doesn't rhyme.

Here is one example of his artistry as a chessplayer. The game won the third brilliancy prize in the tournament of Teplitz Schönau 1922 and Tartakower obviously thought it had deserved a higher prize. In his French book *Tartakover vous parle* (Tartakower speaks to you) he writes that the majority of the jury expressed the opinion that his rook sacrifice had been intuitive, as it was impossible to calculate all the variations, and that such sacrifices should not be encouraged.

Remarkable. I think that nowadays intuitive sacrifices are appreciated much more than sacrifices based on exact calculation, which are often disparagingly called pseudo-sacrifices.

Geza Maroczy • Savielly Tartakower
Teplitz•Schönau, 1922

1. d2•d4 e7•e6 2. c2•c4 f7•f5 3. Nb1•c3 Ng8•f6 4. a2•a3 Bf8•e7 5. e2•e3 0•0 6. Bf1•d3 d7•d5 7. Ng1•f3 c7•c6 8. 0•0 Nf6•e4 9. Qd1•c2 Be7•d6 10. b2•b3 Nb8•d7 11. Bc1•b2 With typical Tartakowerian exaggeration he writes that white trusts the scientific foundation of his play, while black considers the position as a concrete problem: mate in 25!

11...Rf8•f6 12. Rf1•e1 Rf6•h6 White's calm play has permitted black to embark on a dangerous attack. Now white hastens to construct the solid defensive position that many modern players reach more economically with 3. g3.

13. g2•g3 Qd8•f6 14. Bd3•f1 g7•g5 15. Ra1•d1 According to Tartakower white should have played 15. Bg2 at once, to be able to follow-up with Nf3-d2-f1.

15...g5•g4 16. Nc3xe4 Not at once 16. Nd2 because of 16...Nxf2.

16...f5xe4 17. Nf3•d2

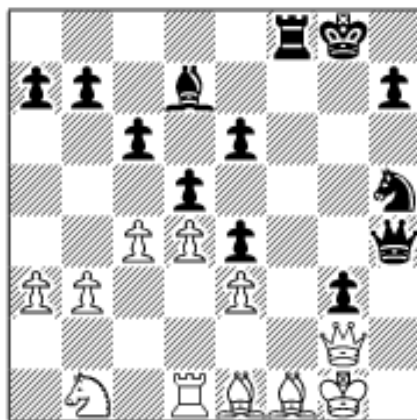


17...Rh6xh2 Black gives a rook for an attack that will only succeed when his three pieces are brought into play that are still lying dormant on the queenside. This is what makes the sacrifice uncalculable (though Tartakower did not agree that it was) and beautiful.

18. Kg1xh2 Qf6xf2+ 19. Kh2•h1 Nd7•f6 20. Re1•e2 Qf2xg3 21. Nd2•b1 Nf6•h5 22. Qc2•d2

Here and on his next few moves white has a choice of defenses which according to Tartakower's notes would all be insufficient. If he is right, I do not dare to say.

22...Bc8•d7 23. Re2•f2 Qg3•h4+ 24. Kh1•g1 Bd6•g3 25. Bb2•c3 Bg3xf2+ 26. Qd2xf2 g4•g3 27. Qf2•g2 Ra8•f8 28. Bc3•e1



28...Rf8xf1+

The sacrifice of the second rook prepares a decisive intervention of his bishop.

29. Kg1xf1 e6•e5 30. Kf1•g1 Bd7•g4 All the remaining black pieces throw themselves on the white king. White has to return some material, but he remains defenseless.

31. Be1xg3 Nh5xg3 32. Rd1•e1 Ng3•f5 33. Qg2•f2 Qh4•g5 34. d4xe5 Bg4•f3+ 35. Kg1•f1 Nf5•g3+ White resigned.

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.