



BOOK REVIEWS



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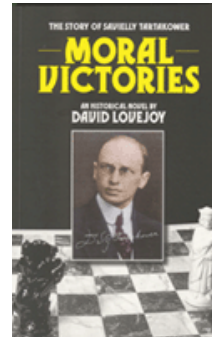
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Bringing one of the Greats to Life

Steve Goldberg

Moral Victories is subtitled “The Story of Savielly Tartakower,” but it is important to note that the author makes it clear that this is what is termed as a historical novel. Generally, this refers to a book based upon a real person, place or event, but not entirely faithful to a strictly accurate historical account.



What’s an example of such a book? Imagine you’re asked to produce a report about a day in the life of George Washington. You research where he lived, the work he did, the family, friends and associates who surrounded him, the type of clothes he wore, hobbies that he enjoyed, and well-known sayings and events that are attributed to him. Then, to make your subject come to life, you create dialogue and situations that are consistent with all of the research you’ve done, although the precise words and events that you write may not have occurred as stated, or even at all. Nevertheless, these “historical liberties” help to flesh out the real-life character in a way that dry facts and statistics do not.

As David Lovejoy explains in his Preface, “This historical novel takes as its basis the life of chess grandmaster Savielly Grigorievitch Tartakower... I have incorporated into this work every biographical fact of which I am aware, but where there appears to be no data I have invented incidents and characters, and occasionally used real personages whom Tartakower could have met, but probably did not. The historical liberties I have taken are indicated in the notes at the end of the book.”

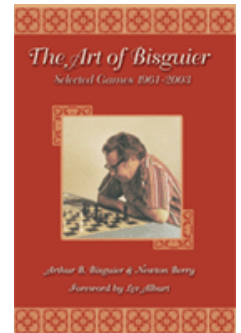
For example, early in the book, Lovejoy has Tartakower saying, “My childhood in Rostov-on-Don proceeded according to the usual principles. I played in the nursery with my younger brother Artur and older sister Sylvia. My parents had two other children who died in infancy, one older than Sylvia and one younger than Artur.”

In his “End Notes” at the conclusion of the book, Lovejoy notes, “The bare bones of Tartakower’s childhood and youth are provided by the Swedish book *Schackparad 2: Tartakower* (Stockholm 1987) edited by Erik Lundin, which is a collection of articles by and about the grandmaster. Tartakower writes there that his parents had five children, but he only mentions siblings Artur and Sylvia by name. I have used this clue to guess that two children died young. Only research in Rostov-on-Don might resolve the issue.”

Thus, even the fictional accounts fall into the category of “might have happened this way.” The problem is that in the main text itself (for example, where Tartakower explains that “My parents had two other children who died in infancy”) the fact that this is one of the author’s historical liberties is not indicated. It’s only by referring to the End Notes that the reader will understand that this may or may not be accurate.

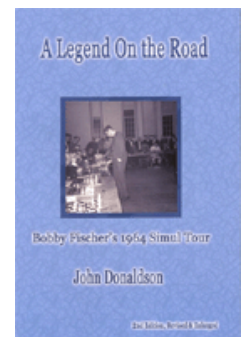
Perhaps Lovejoy felt it would have broken the flow of the narrative to

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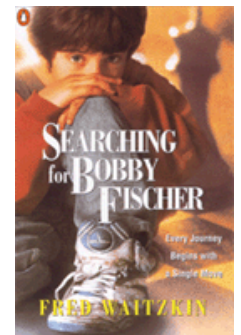


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have an asterisk or other indicator at such spots – in retrospect, I would agree. In any event, in the End Notes, the pages in which such fictionalized accounts occur are noted, so if the reader periodically checks these clarifications, it will be clear when more “historical liberties” occur.

As for Lovejoy himself, he is a journalist who was born in London, educated at Oxford University, and is currently making his home in Australia. As the back cover of the book explains, “As an amateur chess player his highest achievement was the championship of Queensland many years ago.”



Savielly Tartakower

Moral Victories contains two alternating story lines. The book opens with an eager young reporter for a small British newspaper interviewing a Lieutenant Cartier, who we learn is in actuality Savielly Tartakower. The reason for the use of an alternate name becomes clear as the book unfolds. “Cartier” is in his mid-fifties, serving in the “Free French,” a military division of the French government-in-exile based in England during World War II.

The second story line consists of Tartakower’s memoirs, beginning with his birth in Russia in 1887, and continuing in segments until the timelines of the two story lines merge. At that point, one chapter remains and the reporter briefly recounts the final decade of Tartakower’s life.

Many of the aphorisms attributed to Tartakower are sprinkled throughout the book, such as:

- “The mistakes are all there, waiting to be made.” [Note – other sources list the quote as “The blunders are all there, on the chessboard, ready to be made.”]
- “There are only two kinds of moves in the opening. Moves which are wrong and moves which could be wrong.”
- “The winner of the game is the player who makes the next-to-last mistake.”
- “It’s always better to sacrifice your opponent’s men.”
- “No game was ever won by resigning.”

Why the title *Moral Victories*? A moral victory is said to have occurred when a player or team encounters an opponent who is bigger, stronger, faster or otherwise more talented, yet nearly pulls out victory. Not actual victory, but the vanquished comes closer than expected. Perhaps this refers to Tartakower’s record of strong finishes in many tournaments against the world’s best players, yet never quite reaching the pinnacle of participating in a world championship match, although he came tantalizingly close. Or it may refer to his rising above the monstrous human behavior that was so prevalent in his time (and ours as well). In any event, attributed to Tartakower is the statement “Moral victories don’t count.”

Moral Victories is a book that adult chess players can appreciate, and it can offer a brief respite when you're just too exhausted to delve into any more lines of the Smith-Morra Gambit, or when you've completed your thousandth tactics problem this month. I would be hesitant, though, to recommend this book to children younger than about sixteen, primarily because of the many very realistic wartime episodes and themes recounted by the author, although he does handle such issues with a delicate hand.

Lovejoy includes depth of coverage of a number of Tartakower's contemporaries, including such luminaries as Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine. He alludes to the alleged collusion with the Nazis on the part of Alekhine, although not in a heavy-handed manner. But any reader who has suffered the pain of visceral racism or anti-Semitism will well understand that the conversations and events as depicted throughout the book could easily have occurred in some form, if not precisely with the exact words and in the exact time and place as the author has described.

If you sense, as I did initially, that such a historical novel has little more to offer than any purely fictional offering, put your fears to rest. Did you enjoy the films *Searching for Bobby Fischer* or [Knights of the South Bronx](#)? Both movies were based on actual people and events, but had no shortage of embellishments. We readily accept such "historical liberties" on the big screen, and I found *Moral Victories* to be similarly informative and entertaining.

Realistic, well-written, engaging chess novels are a rarity, but David Lovejoy has done a remarkable job of combining extensive research with mostly believable dialogue and situations. I was regularly flipping back to the End Notes to see just how real a given exchange was between Tartakower and other characters in the book. I found the arrangement vaguely reminiscent of Paul Hoffman's *King's Gambit*, in which the main text is supplemented with extensive notes at the end of the book. Game scores to several of Tartakower's efforts are included in these End Notes.

Before I cracked open the pages of *Moral Victories*, I knew little of Savielly Tartakower. But now, thanks to the talented work of David Lovejoy, one of the game's greats has truly come alive.

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by David Lovejoy

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