



Dark Times

The eight strongest players in the world contesting a double round-robin; the AVRO tournament of 1938 had much in common with the recent London Candidates' tournament. Hans Ree had almost relegated Tartakower's daily reports from 1938 to the dustbin.

My wife saved me from the excesses of a fierce campaign that she had initiated herself. She wanted to clean out our house by filling one big refuse bag every day for an indefinite time, at least until the result would be noticeable. 'What if we both died in a plane crash and other people would have to perform this task, sieving nuggets worth saving from heaps of books and papers spread over three floors? It's too much to ask of them.'

I remembered a play by Ionesco in which a corpse growing and growing, leaving less and less room for the living occupants of the apartment. The encroaching mass of dead paper in our place had to be stopped, so I joined the fight.

Everybody knows what happens then. At first you are conscientious, throwing away only the things you are sure you will not miss. Decisions do not come easy. You re-read letters, old notebooks, magazines. There are loads of books that you will probably never open again and that won't fetch a penny now. Yes, but they are still able to evoke memories.

This way you make no progress. After a while you really start to throw away things and after you have filled your first or second bag, a mad cleaning frenzy takes hold of you, as if by relegating the past to the dustbin you might give yourself a new life.

My wife came to see if I had already entered the spirit of the operation and was just in time to prevent me from throwing away three school exercise books from the 1930s. Glued to the pages were Dutch newspaper reports about Max Euwe's two world championship matches against Alekhine and about the AVRO tournament of 1938. 'Are you crazy?' she asked.

Forgive me for this tale of domestic life. As the French writer René-François de Chateaubriand put it in his *Memoirs from the other side of the grave*, illustrious men should be silent about their exploits and be commemorated by a nameless voice that comes from the heart of nations and the depth of ages. We, however, the *vulgus*, are allowed to speak about ourselves, for if *we* don't, nobody will.

Chateaubriand served as ambassador and Foreign Minister for France

and that he includes himself in the *vulgus* may not betray excessive modesty, but rather high ambition.

Tartakower comes to Holland

During the recent London Candidates' tournament I read the clippings about the AVRO tournament, which was similar in many respects. I don't know how the notebook came into my possession. The cover bears the name W.F. Apking, which is not familiar to me, but both there and elsewhere there are many repetitions of the name J.C. Apkings, with small variations in handwriting, as if a youngster is practising a signature.

This must have been Jan Apking, whom I used to know well from the Amsterdam chess circles. I must have played several games against him. In 1938 he was probably about 12 years old. The exercises, in geometry, algebra, French, German and English, seem too advanced for a boy of that age, so he might have used a notebook from an older family member for his clippings. I am grateful that he preserved them, but my thanks would come too late, as he died in 1999.

The clippings were from the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* and a related paper *De Courant/Nieuws van den Dag* (The Newspaper/Daily News) which shared some of the former's content, but appeared later in the day and carried more news about Amsterdam.

For important chess events such as Euwe's matches and the AVRO tournament, *De Telegraaf* would engage Savielly Tartakower. It also had a Dutch chess writer, Willem Schelfhout, known as Wats because of his initials. Tartakower's contributions were



Savielly Tartakower's writings in *De Telegraaf* were not only popular with Dutch readers. Salo Flohr and Samuel Reshevsky were also curious what the grand old man had to say about them during the AVRO tournament.

signed, those by Wats or by an occasional reporter who played the role of the chess innocent – but a respectful one – were not.

It was not always clear whether Tartakower really wrote everything that appeared under his name. When he quotes an obscure little rhyme by the Flemish political activist René de Clercq or a poem by the Dutch poet and diplomat Constantijn Huygens, it seems obvious that the merry Wats had not only translated Tartakower's writings, but sometimes embellished them a bit.

Full-page treatment

I already knew it, but it still strikes me how much space there was for chess. All 56 games were printed in *De Telegraaf*, many of them annotated by Tartakower, and on some days the chess stories – round reports, games with analysis, interviews and human interest stories – occupied almost a full page, a big page that is, almost twice the size of modern tabloids.

I don't know how many people visited the tournament. I have been present at Dutch chess events with

more than a thousand spectators a day, and I suppose it was no different at the AVRO tournament.

Such newspaper coverage and on-the-spot spectator interest has been replaced by Internet reports which, to me, still have an eerie quality – as if a tournament doesn't really exist when it's only followed on the Internet.

At the London Candidates' there was room for about 300 spectators-in-the-flesh, and I have read that the space was often only half filled. In an inter-

view organizer Andrew Paulson said that this was exactly the way he had wanted it, as potential sponsors would be impressed by the number of Internet hits and live human beings would only be in the way. This was difficult to believe. I think Paulson would be delighted when a full stadium could be filled with chess enthusiasts, but that's not likely ever to happen.

Gigantic lobes

There they came, the chess heroes treading on Dutch soil at the start of November 1938. Only Reuben Fine had already been in the Netherlands for several months. At the time he was married to a Dutch woman and he was fluent enough in Dutch to speak on Dutch radio now and then.

I was reminded of the reminiscences of Hein Donner in his book *The King* about another great Dutch tournament, Groningen 1946, which he had visited as a 19-year-old.

Donner wrote: 'And then I saw Botvinnik! Smaller than the others, perhaps barely 2.75 meters, but with the unruffled face of the man who has seen it all and who has severed the

'Sonas has called AVRO the 'most elite tournament' of all time, as it had the strongest eight players of the world and nobody else.'



ties with the sufferings of the ultimate world; his eyes turned inward, rejoicing as it were in the deep delight of his rich realm of thought. I noticed the strange curvature of his forehead and as if in a glass skull I could see his gigantic lobes, which had reinvented the game of chess and given it a new meaning. There he stood, the tremendous one.

Dutch chess enthusiasts may have looked at the participants of the AVRO tournament with similar tremblings, such was the stature of chess champions at that time.

Some of the participants called it the greatest chess tournament ever, with good reason, and even now there are good grounds to call it the greatest tournament of all time.

The American chess metrician Jeff Sonas has called AVRO the 'most elite tournament' of all time, as according to his rating system it had the strongest eight players of the world and nobody else. Add to this, for seriousness, that it was a double round-robin.

Youth triumphed

Have a look at the tournament table. There was World Champion Alexander Alekhine, two ex-champions, José Raúl Capablanca and Max Euwe, and the future champion Mikhail Botvinnik. Youth, represented by Paul Keres (22) and Reuben Fine (24), triumphed. Note that Keres, who would be declared tournament winner on tiebreak, won only three games. Under the rules of the London Candidates, victory would have gone to Fine.

Alekhine's result showed that he would have a hard time defending his title against the younger generation. Capablanca's result was disappointing. He turned 50 during the tournament and later it was written that he had struggled with health problems. Capablanca would die within four years, on 8 March 1942. Salo Flohr's score was dismal, but there were extenuating circumstances.

In 1937 Flohr had been appointed by FIDE to challenge Alekhine. Though FIDE had not yet gained authority

over the world championship, a match between Alekhine and Flohr, to be organized by the Czech shoe manufacturing company Bata, seemed like becoming reality, until it was summarily wrecked by political events.

On 30 September 1938, the infamous Munich Agreement, which delivered Sudetenland into Hitler's hands, was signed. Other parts of Czechoslovakia were taken by Hungary and Poland. Through these events, Flohr, originally a Polish Jew who had become a naturalized Czech citizen, had not only lost his match, but also his adopted country. What was left of Czechoslovakia would be occupied by Germany in March 1939.

Alekhine holds his cards

It had been the intention of the AVRO broadcasting company that their tournament would produce a challenger for Alekhine, who however made it clear from the start that he would keep a free hand in choosing his next opponent. Alekhine named Samuel Reshevsky as the favourite to win the tournament (a pleasant sign of modesty, writes Tartakower) and at the opening ceremony declared himself ready to play a match against any participant of this great event, be it the winner or the tailender, as they would all be worthy opponents.

A fine compliment to the organizers, wrote Tartakower. But of course it also meant that Alekhine could do as he wanted. He had signed a vague contract with AVRO in which he had declared himself willing to play the winner, but under conditions which would be settled later and, most importantly, not

AVRO 1938

1	Paul Keres	8½
2	Reuben Fine	8½
3	Mikhail Botvinnik	7½
4	Max Euwe	7
5	Samuel Reshevsky	7
6	Alexander Alekhine	7
7	José Raúl Capablanca	6
8	Salo Flohr	4½



MAX EUWE CENTRE AMSTERDAM

Paul Keres, the 22-year-old co-winner of the AVRO tournament, enjoys a free day on the beach.

before he had played other matches against opponents of his choice.

Without clearly mentioning a favourite, Tartakower wrote that for him 'the mechanism of the chess struggle has been developed most deeply with Botvinnik.' He also took the opportunity to state that the young generation had not really created a new style, but only improvements on what Tartakower in the past had called the hypermodern movement, but which he now, never at loss for a catchy expression, preferred to call the secessionist school of chess.

Everyone was in a good mood at the start of the tournament. Dutch hospitality and love of chess were praised, though some misgivings were raised about AVRO's decision to play the tournament in 10 different towns and cities.

Capablanca declared that he was in excellent health. In the Carlton hotel in Amsterdam, where the players were staying, Alekhine still acted as a king surrounded by courtiers. Keres was quiet and modest, as he would remain all his life.

On the brink of war

When big newspaper pages were reserved for chess, it was not because nothing else of importance was going on. Europe was on the brink of the most horrible war in history. Chateaubriand, who I mentioned earlier, wrote in his *Memoirs* that Napoleon had brought war to such an extreme that it had ended the feasibility of war forever. The door of war was closed, he wrote, and could never again be opened, because it was blocked by the dead bodies of millions of victims. He should have been right.

The advantage of newspaper clippings over a digitalized archive is that on the back you may find things you were not looking for. The other side of the pages with the chess reports in *De Telegraaf* was often about the political crisis in Europe and about the fate of the Jews who tried to escape from Hitler's Germany. All players would be perturbed by this news, but Flohr would have been most deeply affected, of course.

On the back of the chess reports I read that the French Prime Minister Daladier declared under tremendous applause that a loyal agreement should be reached with Germany and that war would never be a solution. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese fled their cities because of the advance of the Japanese troops. A German press campaign against the democracies was denounced. In London, the British Prime Minister Chamberlain spoke about the fate of German Jewish refugees. Palestine, British Guyana, Tanganyika, Rhodesia and Kenya were mentioned as possible places of refuge within the British empire.

Germans gathered outside the Dutch embassy in Berlin because they had heard that the Netherlands might give transit visas to refugees, but they gathered in vain.

Members of the Dutch Parliament put questions to the Minister of Justice Carel Goseling about the harsh treatment of German refugees, who were stopped at the Dutch border and sent

back to Germany. There is mention of a suicide at the border railway station. Goseling stood for a very restrictive policy towards the entry of refugees; his boss, Prime Minister Colijn, called them undesirable aliens.

In Parliament, Goseling said that indeed some German women had become emotional when they discovered that they were going to be sent back, but that calm had been restored quickly. Goseling himself would die in 1941 in the German concentration camp Buchenwald, where he was taken as a hostage. One of the people

‘AVRO had been a great tournament, but it had no follow-up, because of the interference of what Tartakower had called “a higher power”.’

who witnessed his death was the brilliant Dutch chess writer Evert Straat, a hostage himself who survived the camp.

Only once did I see a glimpse of the coming catastrophe on the chess pages. An anonymous reporter, a man who knew or pretended to know very little about chess, wrote that there were seven national flags on the stage. The flag of Czechoslovakia is red and white with a triangular blue indentation that can be extended at will. The Estonian colours are sombre and full of premonition; white, blue and black.

A friend of the reporter points out Mrs Capablanca and Mrs Botvinnik. The old and the new Russia, says the reporter, not referring to the age of the two Russian ladies, but to the Russia of

the emigrants and the Russia that has not emigrated yet. Somewhere Tartakower writes that a higher power has destroyed Flohr's preferential FIDE shares. But apart from these brief allusions, politics is not mentioned on the chess pages.

Off like a rocket

Fine started off like a rocket, scoring an almost unbelievable 5½ points in the first six games. There is a tournament book by Euwe, who wrote the game annotations, but not the round reports. I don't know who did. Whoever it was, after the fifth round he wrote that first place had already been decided and the further struggle would only be about who would finish second. 'It is about time for the other participants to reconcile themselves to this fact.' With nine rounds still to go, he was a bit premature, but Fine must have seemed a superman by that time.

In Round 7, Fine lost to Keres, but he was still leading Keres by half a point. During the second leg Keres proved the old maxim that the player who goes through a tournament without losses will win. Before the last round he and Fine were equal, but Keres had the better Sonneborn-Berger tiebreak score and would be declared tournament winner if they drew their game, in which Keres had white.

It ended not with a bang but a whimper; an uneventful draw of 19 moves. Fine went to the telegraph office to send a message to his mother and Keres said that his first telegram would be to his newspaper in Tallinn. On the same day Euwe already delivered the first pages of his tournament book to the publisher.

Two mathematicians

Under the headline 'Two students of mathematics about their chess success' Tartakower extensively interviewed the victors. Not surprisingly, Keres said that it was every chess master's dream to play for the world championship. 'Alekhine has, according to my opinion, not yet spoken his last word,



though even in his heyday weak spots in his way of playing could be spotted.' It seems that Keres was not particularly afraid of Alekhine if there were to be a match.

In the light of what we know about his subsequent chess career, it is a surprise how serious he was then about a career as a mathematician. Right after the tournament an exam was waiting for him. Tartakower asks him how long his studies will take. 'Three more years if I settle for being a teacher, but I may decide to go for a PhD,' says Keres.

Fine also seems set on a career in mathematics, which he said he had already studied for four and a half years, with six months still to go. Fine said that he was always aware that his task in life would not be chess, but science.

He also was clear about the fact that not he, but Keres had earned the right to challenge Alekhine. Much later, in 1973, in his book *Bobby Fischer's Conquest of the World's Chess Championship*, Fine would write that it would have been fair if, after Alekhine's death in 1946, he and Keres had been declared interim World Champions.

From coming close to earning the right to challenge Alekhine, whatever that right meant at the time, to being interim World Champion – that was a

small step for Fine, but a giant leap for the rest of us.

As we know, both Keres and Fine would abandon their scientific studies, Keres for chess, for which we can be grateful, and Fine for psychoanalysis.

A few days later Alekhine said to Tartakower: 'I expect a challenge from Keres, for he can hardly expect from me, the World Champion, that I will ask him to play against me. I will surely accept his challenge, certainly when AVRO will give its support.'

What was not generally known at the time was that immediately after the last round of the AVRO tournament Alekhine had talks in the Carlton hotel about his next world championship match, not with Keres, but with Botvinnik.

AVRO and its aftermath

While the players were packing their bags to leave, a reporter of *De Telegraaf* (probably Wats) had a final interview with Alekhine, who complained about the hardship of the tournament, played in 10 towns and cities.

'Would you believe that during my game against Fine I thought I would collapse of exhaustion? Never again in my life will I allow anyone to talk me into something like this, even if they offered me three times as much. Do you know that I have lost seven

pounds during this tournament? And do you see Mr. Alving (a representative of AVRO) walking around there? The man didn't even play, but hasn't he grown 10 years older during these three weeks of excitement and trotting about?'

A year later, on 1 September, 1939, the war in Europe would begin with the German invasion of Poland. Salo Flohr had stayed in the Netherlands for some time after the AVRO tournament, then moved to Sweden and subsequently found refuge in the Soviet Union. Keres became a Soviet citizen after his country Estonia had lost its short-lived independence by being first overrun by the Soviet Union, then by Germany and then by the Soviet Union again. Capablanca would die in 1942 and Alekhine in 1946, at a time when the British Chess Federation had agreed to organize his match against Botvinnik. Fine, a gifted but quirky character, became a prominent psychoanalyst. Reshevsky would play a Candidates' match against Viktor Kortchnoi as late as 1968. Euwe would become a computer scientist and a respected president of FIDE and Botvinnik, well, we all know about Botvinnik.

AVRO had been a great tournament, but it had no follow-up because of the interference of what Tartakower had called 'a higher power'. ■

WASHINGTON
INTERNATIONAL

6 – 11 August 2013
Washington, DC

\$22,000 in Guaranteed prizes
Sets, boards, and clocks provided
Continental breakfast each morning
Minimum 2100 FIDE to play in A section
GM and IM norms possible
Hotel is on DC Metro
Free entry to non-US GMs and IMs
Reduced entry for all non-US players

Conditions possible for non-US GMs & IMs, contact washintl@mdchess.com

<http://washingtoninternationalchess.org>