



LIFE, STRUGGLE AND SCHOLARSHIP

A REVIEW OF "EMANUEL LASKER: VOLUME III; LABORS AND LEGACY, CHESS, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY" EDITED BY RICHARD FORSTER, MICHAEL NEGELE AND RAJ TISCHBIEREK, WITH A FOREWORD BY JOHN NUNN, EXZELSIOR VERLAG, BERLIN, 2022

BY PETER O'BRIEN

Well-known chess players have often, at least in the public eye, been viewed as one-dimensional. Excellent at the game, yet with little else of interest about them. The colossal exception is Emanuel Lasker

Apart from being the longest-ever reigning world chess champion, Lasker has some claims to be considered as a late 19th/early 20th-century renaissance man. As the title of this third and final volume on his life shows, his insatiable curiosity allied with a remarkable intellect led him into so many areas of life. And he did not dabble. Although, as the authors point out, some of his works could have benefitted from a deeper grounding in the subjects concerned, he did not hesitate to join the debate at the highest level. From disputations with Einstein concerning the theory of relativity to the discussion of the meaning of western culture, through to critiquing some of

the famed Culbertson's work on contract bridge, Lasker was there. His renowned approach to life as a question of struggle was not merely a perspective on existence – it was his way of life.

The editors and contributors to this magnificent work of scholarship (for that is what the book is - top-class historical research delivered by authors who know their craft) seek to offer us the whole spectrum of cosmopolitanism tinged with chauvinism, Judaism yet circumventing the rabbinical style, scientific precision coupled with an acute sense of its fallibility, seriousness broadly sprinkled with humour (on p.73 there is his delightful comment 'the loss of my teeth has had a positive effect on my French pronunciation'), and an ethical outlook derived from essential humanity rather than precept.



Kagan: A Master Mind, on and off the board

The material is presented in nine deep chapters, each drawing on rich archival information and supplemented by countless photographs and other supporting documents. Given that one of the chapters is a bibliography of Lasker's writings on everything which interested him, and this extends beyond 50 pages, the remarkable range of both Lasker and his biographers should not be in any doubt.

Richard Forster, the justly famed Swiss computer engineer, offers in Chapter 1 a Biographical Compass which goes from the outbreak of war in 1914, when Lasker was in his mid-forties, through to his death in New York in 1941. At the very start, we are given quotations from articles written by Lasker in 1914 extolling German superiority and scornfully deriding other cultures, especially English and Russian. These pieces did not bring him any friends in those countries and most likely lost him more than a few. His initial optimism that Germany would emerge as a victor in the conflict did not prevent him from engaging in proper scientific work to assist the war effort. Indeed, it seems possible

It seems possible that, among other things, Lasker contributed to the design of a tank which would, had it been produced, have certainly revolutionised the horrendous trench warfare in WW1

that, among other things, he contributed to the design of a tank which would, had it been produced, have certainly revolutionised the horrendous trench warfare. Furthermore, in December 1916 he filed for a patent concerning a method he had developed for the conservation of fruit, vegetables and other perishables. He was more than alert to the dangers of 'fake news' about events, and gave many talks, in Germany, about the need to bolster morale.

The end of the war and the consequences this would have for life as he had known it were not lost on Lasker. He perceived that a particular world was gone (a view superbly expressed years later by Stefan Zweig in 'Die Welt von Gestern')



Laskers in Moscow: A haven in the storm

**Lasker and his wife received in Madrid
an invitation to a *corrida*.**

**The response gives another insight
into Lasker's perception of struggle.**

**He said that neither of them
'cared to attend a fight in which
both contestants do not have
equal arms and equal chances'**

(The World of Yesterday)) and that cosmopolitanism was under siege, and most likely destined to be swept aside, with his own country a leader of the aggressors. Yet, as always, his optimism and capacity to adapt prevailed.

With the exceptional support of his wife Martha, far better versed in business affairs than her husband, the Laskers invested in property in the countryside, not too far from Berlin. This gave them a kind of refuge, though Lasker was never inclined to shirk any of life's challenges, above all those facing a prominent Jewish personality in a profoundly antisemitic world. While

this whirlwind of change/destruction was engulfing him, there was also the matter of defending his world chess crown. Relations with Capablanca had never been good, but suffice it to say that a match did take place in La Habana in early 1921 which Lasker lost. The loss does not seem to have perturbed him greatly, and he enjoyed returning to Europe. In fact, he and his wife came back through Spain where in Madrid they received an invitation to a *corrida*. The response gives another insight into Lasker's perception of struggle. He said that neither of them 'cared to attend a fight in which both contestants do not have equal arms and equal chances'.

Shedding the mantle of world champion appears to have liberated Lasker in various ways, while the drawbacks were few. He continued travelling with barely a break, worked intensively on several of his non-chess activities, and rapidly recovered from reputational damage caused by his nationalistic stance in the early stages of the Great War. By 1924 he was not only back in the USA but also the brilliant victor of the New York



Art Workers Moscow 1937: Ever the magnet of attention

International Tournament, well ahead of Capablanca. This turned out to be not the only occasion when his tournament performances outstripped those of the Cuban. The appearance fees he could command for tournament appearances remained relatively high, and he clearly understood the value of scarcity by constantly refusing to play in places which did not offer him enough.

Travel, even if occasioned and facilitated by the passport which his chess fame gave him, was always accompanied by countless attempts to obtain publishers for his books, especially those not relating to chess, as well as encounters with a wonderful cast

of business characters. In the USA he had dealings with Nathan Schweitzer, who was busy making a fortune in the poultry markets ('We sell anything with wings except angels'), alongside major lawyers, university leaders and several other highly influential people.

Whatever dimension of his life we take, friction was always there. As a person driven by fundamental ethical beliefs, by a *weltanschauung* which saw no problems in the coexistence of apparently contradictory perceptions, and by a commitment to dialogue whether spoken or written, friction was not only bound to occur but also positively welcomed. As on the chessboard, so in life – struggle and the clash of opposing ideas offered everyone the chance to learn. Of course, quite a few of those coming up against this relentless pursuit of Lasker's did not see the clashes in the same way that he did. Animosities arose. In several cases, though not all, time proved to be a healer. Relationships, whether in the chess world or in the other worlds which

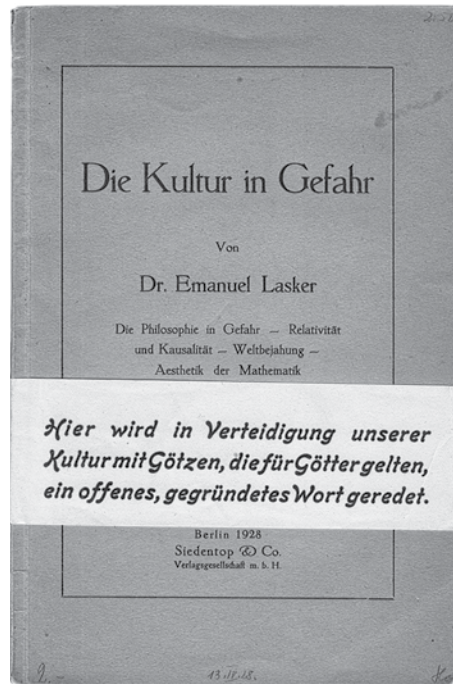
**Whatever dimension of his life we take,
friction was always there.
As a person driven by
fundamental ethical beliefs,
with a *weltanschauung* which saw
no problems in the coexistence of
apparently contradictory perceptions**

Lasker inhabited, were often repaired. Whatever the surface appearances may have been, I think we can say that Lasker had the wisdom to distinguish between the quality of the person and the specific content of a particular disagreement.

The 1930s were a disastrous decade for Lasker and so many other truly outstanding Jewish figures. Both Forster's biography and Sergey Voronkov's chapter on the Laskers' time in the Soviet Union spell out the profound worries (never to be dissipated) the great Master had not only for himself but also for the whole civilization of which he was a prominent part. At the latest by 1932, he had perceived that a catastrophe was about to engulf that civilisation. And he also sensed that the submerging wave would move at astonishing speed.

Just before reading the book under review, I had read a very recent bestseller in Germany by Uwe Wittstock entitled '1933: Der Winter der Literatur'. This day-by-day account of the approximately seven weeks from the end of January 1933 to mid-March 1933 (by which time Hitler was Reichskanzler) shows how the whole cultural world in Germany was literally blown to smithereens by unmitigated savagery. Lasker knew that refuge would have to be found. It is perhaps ironic that the Soviet Union fulfilled that function, at least for a couple of years. The Laskers were given a more than decent apartment in Moscow, and while there the seemingly ageless champion turned in one of his greatest tournament performances, splendidly analysed by Manuel Marin in his chapter towards the end of the book. But Stalin's 'urge for the purge' could not be contained, so the Laskers set out for their last abode in the USA.

It has often been remarked that Lasker did not, like many others, leave a 'chess school'. The problem with schools is that by setting out specific ways things



Kultur in Gefahr:

The never ending struggle to protect the cultural heritage

'should be done' they make themselves vulnerable to attack as times change and attitudes alter. Instead, Lasker has transcended the phase of 'builders of schools' to become the great influencer. Maybe the world we live in right now, in which certain views on how things should be have come under the fiercest assault and the need to stand up and be counted has, at last, become apparent to many, is particularly receptive to the Lasker message. If it is not, it should be. This outstanding piece of scholarship proffered by Richard Forster and his fellow historians spells out the message in an inimitable style.