

EMANUEL LASKER (December 12, 1868 – January 11, 1941)

by HEINZ KLAUS STRICK, Germany

EMANUEL LASKER was born in Berlinchen, a town in West Pomerania (today: Barlinek), the son of ADOLF LASKER, cantor of the Jewish community, and his wife ROSALIE ISRAELSSOHN. At the age of eleven, his parents sent him to Berlin so that he could attend high school there.



He lived with his brother BERTHOLD, eight years older, who studied medicine in Berlin (in 1894 BERTHOLD LASKER married the writer ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER).

A leisure activity, playing chess, which his brother taught him, soon became a passion with which he supplemented his pocket money in cafés. When his school performance suffered, his parents urged him to change schools and find a suitable grammar school in Landsberg an der Warthe (today: Gorzów Wielkopolski). However, they overlooked the fact that the headmaster of the new grammar school was the president of the local chess club and his mathematics teacher was the local chess champion ...

After passing his school-leaving exams, EMANUEL LASKER studied mathematics and philosophy at the universities in Berlin, Göttingen and Heidelberg while continuing his career as a chess player. In 1889 he won a first chess tournament in Berlin and a month later a tournament in Breslau, which earned him the title of German Chess Champion.

He also used invitations to participate in chess tournaments in England and the United States to continue his studies in mathematics. As he did not lose a single game in the USA, he was eventually even able to challenge the reigning (first official) world champion WILHELM STEINITZ – LASKER was only 24 years old. The clear victory in this competition was attributed by envious people to the fact that his opponent was already 58 years old and therefore no longer up to the challenge of a long tournament.

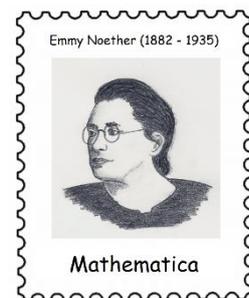


LASKER returned to Germany and fell ill with typhoid fever, but this did not prevent him from writing his first book on chess. Due to resuming his mathematics studies, he could only take part in a few tournaments, but he won them all. He was also successful in another world championship competition against STEINITZ.

In 1900 he was finally able to complete his mathematics studies and he obtained his doctorate in Erlangen under the algebraist MAX NOETHER with the thesis *Über Reihen auf der Convergengrenze* [On series at convergence boundaries] which was also published in the journal *Philosophische Transaktionen*.

Although his paper *Zur Theorie der Moduln und Ideale* [On the theory of moduli and ideals], published in 1905 in the *Mathematische Annalen*, was highly acclaimed among experts (and was the basis for the important investigations carried out later by EMMY NOETHER), he did not succeed in finding a position as a mathematician at a university in Germany or England, nor in the United States.

(drawing © Andreas Strick)



He concentrated fully on chess again and published chess magazines (*Deutsche Schachzeitung* [German Chess Journal] and *LASKER'S Chess Magazine*).

Between 1907 and 1910 he defended his title as world champion a total of six times and in addition, there were exhibition matches and tournaments. He demanded a high fee from the challengers and organisers, as he had to earn his living from this.

In 1911 he married the widowed writer MARTHA COHN and they lived together in Berlin and later on a country estate south of Berlin.



A renewed competition for the world championship title was prevented by the First World War. As a "German patriot", LASKER invested all his savings in German war bonds and was almost penniless at the end of the war.

Nevertheless, he was prepared to give up his title without a match to the Cuban challenger JOSÉ RAÚL CAPABLANCA. However, organisers persuaded him to compete, which then took place in Havana in 1921. LASKER suffered greatly from the climate in the Cuban capital and gave up after 14 games had been played.

He had now held the title of World Chess Champion for 27 years – longer than any of the world champions who would follow. In a tournament in New York he beat the new world champion CAPABLANCA once again, but from then on he was more involved with other strategic games, especially *Go* and *Bridge*.

In 1933 LASKER was forced to leave Germany and the National Socialist regime confiscated all his assets. Once again he had to earn his living by participating in chess tournaments and demonstration events.



During a tournament in Moscow in 1936, the 68-year-old was offered a job as a mathematician at the *Academy of Sciences* there. However, his "employer", NIKOLAI VASSILYEVICH KRYLENKO, People's Commissar for Justice and himself a high-ranking chess player, expected him to be less concerned with mathematics than with coaching Soviet chess players.

But one year later, KRYLENKO was removed from office as part of the Stalinist purges and executed after a show trial and LASKER had to emigrate again together with his wife. Once in New York, MARTHA LASKER fell ill and died a short time later. LASKER's health also deteriorated increasingly and at one event he became dizzy and had to be hospitalised. He died of kidney failure.

In addition to the above-mentioned mathematical writings and numerous contributions to chess literature (including *Lehrbuch des Schachspiels* [How to play chess]), LASKER's life's achievements also include philosophical writings (*Struggle* – title of the German edition was *Kampf* – as well as *Die Philosophie des Unvollendbar* [The philosophy of the unfinishable] and *Das Begreifen der Welt* [The comprehension of the world]), from which he hoped – in vain – for greater subsequent fame than from his chess writings.

In addition to Go and Bridge, he was also involved in various strategic games, further developed the game of draughts (the new game became known as *Laska*), and published writings on card games (*The Intelligent Card Game*) and other games (*Board Games of the Nations*).

Although some chess openings today bear the name of EMANUEL LASKER, he himself always refused to burden himself with memorising too many moves. Again and again opponents expressed their surprise in retrospect at how LASKER had been able to win the game despite some moves that seemed unfavourable, though others saw it precisely in his strategic superiority that he chose moves that the opponent did not expect at all.



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