

Alekhine's Death

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Alexander Alekhine (1892-1946)

Contradictory accounts of Alekhine's death are rife, and here we present the main evidence and miscellaneous related claims.

The reigning world champion was found dead in his hotel room in Estoril, Portugal on the morning of Sunday, 24 March 1946. Under the heading 'Alone in a Foreign Land', the March-April 1946 *American Chess Bulletin* (page 27) wrote:

'According to reports sent out by international news agencies, Dr Alekhine was found in his room slumped over a chess board. Angina pectoris, aggravated by choking on a piece of meat, is said to have caused death. Burial did not take place until 16 April, funeral expenses being borne by the Chess Federation of Portugal.'

Page 7 of the April 1946 *Chess Review* reported:

'On 24 March a radio newflash announced the death of world champion Alexander Alekhine at the age of 53 in Lisbon [*sic*]. First reports ascribed his death to a heart ailment, but a subsequent autopsy disclosed that death had been caused by "asphyxia due to an obstruction in his breathing channels due to a piece of meat".

This was amplified by an Association Press dispatch: "When Alekhine was found dead on Sunday in the Hotel Estoril [*sic*], he held a piece of beefsteak in his right hand. Intimates said Alekhine was accustomed to eating with his hands, never using knives or forks when he could avoid them, and that he would eat alone when he wanted complete enjoyment from a meal."

The May 1946 *CHESS* (page 167) stated, 'Suicide was suspected but the official inquest verdict was heart failure'. The same page featured the famous photograph of Alekhine in his hotel room. ('We reproduce the photograph with which the *Sunday Pictorial* scored a real "scoop" of Alekhine dead at his table with his chessboard beside him.')



It emerged (as discussed below) that the photograph in *CHESS* was not the only one.



Elsewhere in the same issue (pages 171-172) *CHESS* commented:

'All kinds of stupid statements have appeared in the press concerning Alekhine's death. One of the most frequent reports is "he fed with his fingers and was choked by a lump of steak he had stuffed down his throat with his hands". According to medical opinion, failure of the heart is frequently accompanied by a choking sensation which the victim attempts to remove by putting one or more fingers into the throat passage. If Alekhine had, as the popular press stated, been eating a piece of steak this, during the unconsciousness following heart failure, could have readily lodged in his wind-pipe while Alekhine's fingers would automatically have sought for his throat for the reason given above.'

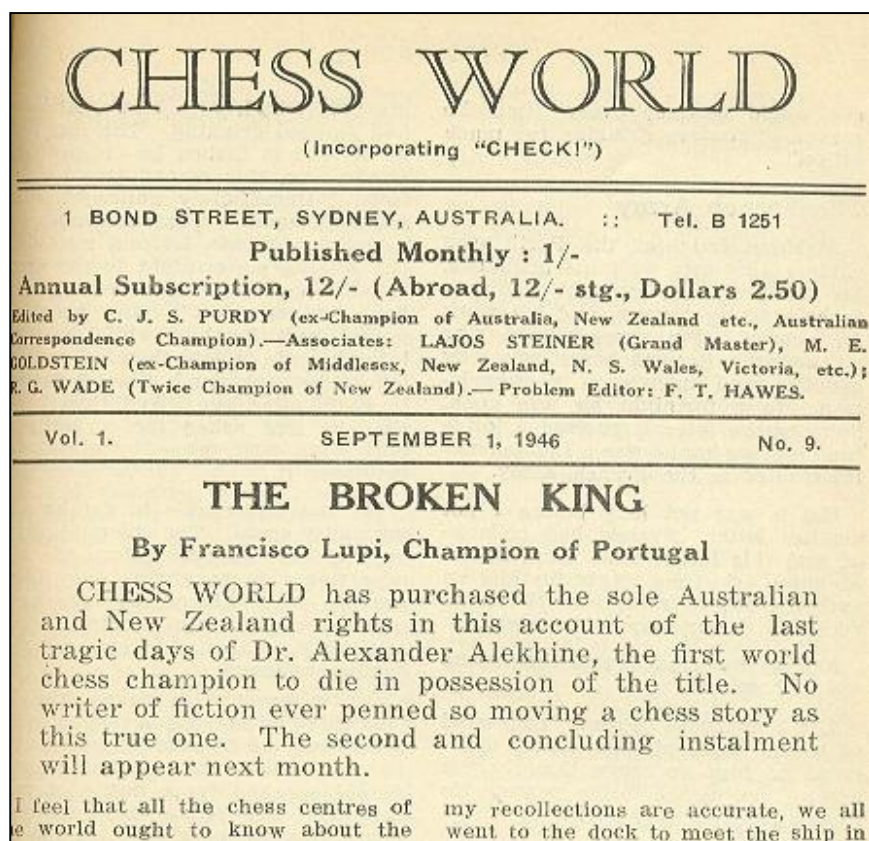
The unbecoming account of Alekhine's table manners was immediately disputed by people who had eaten with Alekhine in past years. See, for instance, pages 1-2 of the 1 April 1946 *Chess World*, quoted on page 280 of

A. Alekhine Agony of a Chess Genius by P. Morán.

All kinds of other claims about Alekhine made it into print. For example, the June 1946 *CHESS* (page 198) mentioned a report from the *News Chronicle* of 6 April 1946:

'Dr Alekhine used to drink three and a half pints of brandy a day. This was revealed today by doctors who are now examining his brain.'

We have no reports on file from the Portuguese press, but on page 35 of their book *Schachgenie Aljechin* H. Müller and A. Pawelczak quoted from the newspaper *O Século*. This stated that on the evening of Saturday 23 March Alekhine's meal was brought to his room and he asked not to be disturbed before 11 o'clock the following morning. At that time a chambermaid found his body.



In his articles 'The Broken King' the Portuguese master Francisco Lupi gave a detailed account of his acquaintance with Alekhine. The following passage is taken from page 187 of *Chess World*, 1 October 1946:

'The autopsy said of him that he suffered from arterio-sclerosis, chronic gastritis and duodenitis, that his heart weighed 350 grammes, that the perimeter of his skull was 540 millimeters, and so on ...

All I know is that on Sunday morning about 10.30 I was awakened and asked to hurry to Estoril, because something had happened to "old Dr Alex". I entered his room together with the Portuguese authorities. There he was, sitting in his chair, in so calm an attitude that one would have thought that he was asleep. There was only a little foam at the corner of his mouth.

The medical verdict as to the cause of death – that a piece of meat had caught in his throat – had no meaning for me.

To me he looked like the king of the chessmen, toppled over after the most dramatic game, the one played on the board of Life.'



Francisco Lupi

At the end of the article the *Chess World* editor (C.J.S. Purdy) added a brief note:

'The verdict at the inquest on Dr Alekhine was heart failure, not choking. If a piece of meat caught in his throat, it must have happened as he lapsed into unconsciousness. He died in the company of his dearest friends: a peg-in travelling chess set lay open beside him.'

The above-mentioned book by Pablo Morán (page 278) gave a statement by Antonio J. Ferreira M.D.:

'I was present at Alexander Alekhine's autopsy, which took place in the Department of Legal Medicine, of the Medical School of the University of Lisbon. Alekhine had been found dead in his room in [an] Estoril hotel under conditions that were regarded as suspicious and indicated the need of an autopsy to ascertain the cause of death.

The autopsy revealed that Alekhine's case of death [was] asphyxia due to a piece of meat, obviously part of a meal, which lodged itself in the larynx. There was no evidence whatsoever that foul play had taken place, neither suicide nor homicide. There were no other diseases to which his sudden and unexpected death could be attributed.'

See also, with all due caution, page 37 of *With the Chess Masters* by G. Koltanowski for a further passage by Dr Ferreira.

According to Morán's book (page 281 of the English edition) at the time of his death Alekhine was analysing and annotating a game between A. Medina and A. Rico in the 1945 Spanish Championship in Bilbao. Even so, in the photograph of Alekhine's body all the pieces were on their starting squares.

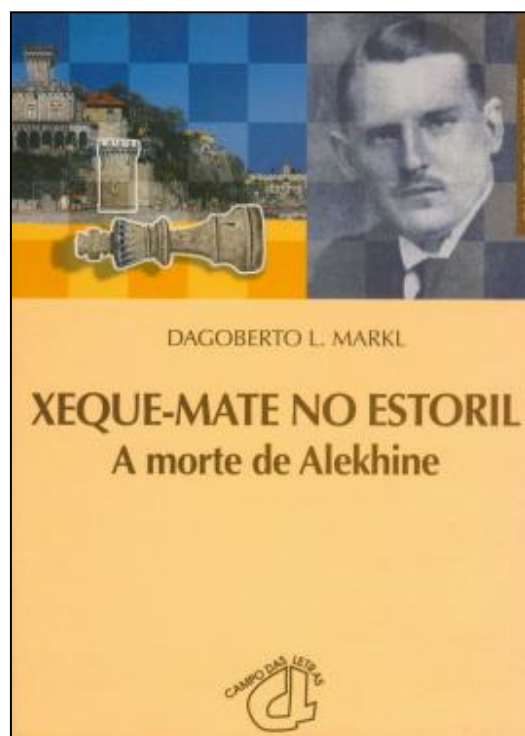
As regards Alekhine's financial circumstances, Lupi wrote (*Chess World*, 1 October 1946, page 186):

'Fifteen days before his death, I was called on the telephone and heard Dr. Alekhine ask me sadly whether I wanted to work with him on "Comments on the Best Games of the Hastings Tournament", adding, "I am completely out of money and I have to make some to buy my cigarettes".'

Nonetheless, we note that the Müller and Pawelczak book on Alekhine (see the photograph caption opposite page 272) stated that he was staying at the Hotel Palace in Estoril, which we take to be the Hotel Palácio, i.e. an establishment of some standing.

We shall be grateful if any correspondents, not least in Portugal, can help us piece together more information on any aspects of Alekhine's death.

After the appearance of C.N. 3057 Luis Costa, the President of the Portuguese Chess Federation, wrote to us about a book published in September 2001 by Campo das Letras, Porto, Portugal, *Xeque-Mate no Estoril* by Dagoberto L. Markl. Having now procured a copy, we revert to various points raised by our correspondent.



Firstly, Müller and Pawelczak's book misidentified the hotel in which Alekhine died. Although he usually stayed at the Estoril Palácio Hotel (which still exists today and has an Alekhine Room), from 5 January 1946 onwards he was at another establishment in Estoril (demolished many years ago), the Hotel do Parque. Professor Markl's book includes a photograph of the hotel registration form completed by Alekhine upon arrival, as well as a reproduction of his official death certificate, which specified the Hotel do Parque as the place of death.

Mr Costa comments:

' This hotel question is intriguing. The Palácio was the German hotel during the War, whereas the Parque was the Allies hotel. Why did Alekhine, who was friendly with the Germans, stay at the Parque during his final visit? At that time the decision concerning where Alekhine stayed was taken by the political police.

As regards the photographing of Alekhine's corpse, Professor Markl's book reproduces a letter written on 24 March 1946 by Luís C. Lupi to Robert Bunnelle of the Associated Press in London. In quoting it below we have corrected the spelling but not the syntax.

'Dear Bunnelle,

Herewith please find four (4) negatives and three prints of EXCLUSIVE ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS taken by me.

They are ALEXANDER ALEKHINE last photographs. I took these pixs with a small camera that I borrowed in the Hotel Park in Estoril where I rushed to cover the Alekhine death story – without my own camera! This is why they are not so good.

Pixs show ALEKHINE lying dead in his hotel room just as he was found in the morning of 24/3, by one hotel waiter. He must have died the night before (23/3) at about eleven p.m. as, according to the porter of the hotel, the Chess Champion went in about 23.40 – and had ordered his dinner to his room as usual. [Page 142 of the Portuguese book notes the timing discrepancy here, i.e. regarding 23.00 and 23.40.]

He seemed to be sleeping so calm and natural he looked. Doctors said he must have died suddenly just when he was beginning to eat. On his right hand he still held a beefsteak – He ate with his hands and used knife and fork only when he ate in public...

The giant of Chess – dead, resembled a fallen oak tree. In his face he kept an expression of deep thought.

For captions suggest you use (if you will use these gruesome pixs...) and rewrite my messages of 23/3 slugged 01230 and 02345. Will you have a couple of prints on these negatives (a couple of each, please)?

and oblige

Yours sincerely,

Luis C Lupi.'

The book reproduces two of the photographs of Alekhine, as given above. Our correspondent comments:

' A careful comparison shows that some objects (papers near the vases) are absent from one of the shots. There are at least four photographs of Alekhine We have found only two in Portugal. As noted in Luis Lupi letter, the negatives were sent to the Associated Press in London, so it is only in their archives that it may be possible to find them.

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The photographs were composed, as it is now an undisputed fact that the chessboard was placed there for the purposes of the shots. A few days after Alekhine Francisco Lupi gave Rui Nascimento (a chess composition master and a strong chess player at that time; he is still alive) the better known " last Alekhine. Francisco Lupi pointed to the chessboard and told Rui Nascimento that it had been put there by Luis, his stepfather, before he took the photographs.

' s death

" photograph of

Luis Lupi was connected with the PIDE (the political police of António Salazar and he was the Associated Press director in Portugal, appointed by the Government. He could do what he wanted with the

' s dictatorship)

" scene

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We do not feel at liberty to reproduce extensively the research presented in *Xeque-Mate no Estoril*, but a general description of the book's contents may be useful. The most important part relates Alekhine's visits to Portugal from 24 January 1940 onwards and supplies considerable documentary detail on the world champion's last weeks and, in particular, the circumstances of his death. Along the way, the wildly inaccurate statements of writers such as Kotov and, especially, Bjelica, are criticized and mocked.

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