

Jeremy Gaige

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One of the most important and remarkable figures in the chess world is the American Jeremy Gaige, the game's 'Mr Archives'. For a quarter of a century he has been compiling detailed records of events (particularly tournaments) and collecting data about chess players, composers, writers, administrators, etc.

His output, nearly all of it privately printed, includes four volumes of tournament crosstables. Published between 1969 and 1974, these contain about 2,000 tables covering the period 1851-1930. They were followed in 1984 by two volumes of *Chess Tournaments A Checklist*, a run-down of over 10,500 tournaments played between 1851 and 1980 with the names of winners and, where possible, the exact dates.

Gaige has produced many other books and booklets over the years. In 1987 he published two small works, *Swiss Chess Personalia* and *Catalog of USA Chess Composers*, followed by what is perhaps his *magnum opus* (although that term may be inadvisable given that he has produced so many *magna opera*). In over 500 pages *Chess Personalia A Biobibliography* (McFarland & Company, Inc.) aims to provide vital statistics on about 14,000 chess personalities from all countries and periods. Unlike Gaige's much smaller earlier book, *A Catalog of Chessplayers & Problemists*, the *Biobibliography* lists sources of information and suggestions for further reading or research. Thus if the reader wishes to know about the *New in Chess* editor, he will find on page 426 that Jan Hendrik Timman was born in Amsterdam on 14 December 1951, became an International Master in 1971 and a Grandmaster in 1974. For further details we are duly referred to pages 36-50 of the September 1985 *New in Chess*, a comprehensive portrait of his career.

Retrospective ratings are also listed, allowing fascinating comparisons between players of the past and present. It cannot be claimed that the name of Gustav Neumann (born on 15 December 1838 in Gleiwitz, died on 16th February 1881 in Allenberg) is on everybody's lips nowadays, yet his 'Elo Historical Rating' of 2570 is the same as the ranking of Larsen, Hort, Spassky and Spraggett in FIDE's July 1987 International Rating List. The book also indicates official titles earned; Keres became a Grandmaster in 1950, but also an International Judge of Chess

Composition in 1957 and an International Arbiter in 1974. Other recipients of the composition title, the book records, include Botvinnik and Bronstein.

Little of the information in the *Biobibliography* is readily available elsewhere. The entry of that fine Australian writer and player C.J.S. Purdy, for instance, lists half-a-dozen carefully selected references which will offer a well-rounded and detailed account of his life and career. (Incidentally, nearly every other chess reference book gives the wrong year for Purdy's birth, 1907 instead of the correct 1906.) Or, to take a rather more obscure figure at random, what other chess work will help the reader who is searching for material about James Thompson? Gaige gives precise references to him in *Chess in Philadelphia*, the *New York Clipper*, the *New York Herald, Turf, Field and Farm*, etc. For good measure, he specifies where Thompson is buried and the reference number of his death certificate.

A glance at the six-page list of bibliographical sources confirms the thoroughly international nature of the book. To quote a few titles at random: *The Austral Chess & Draughts Newspaper*, *Magyar Sakktörténet*, *Persoonlijkheden in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, *Baltische Schachblätter*, *Els Escacs a Catalunya*, *Svensk Författar Lexikon*, *Sto Lat Polskiej Kompozycji Szachowej*. If some nationalities are relatively better represented than others, it is because a book such as the *Biobibliography* is only as good as the available source material. Countries such as Germany and Holland have a rich history of chess magazines – often with several titles concurrently – whereas some other countries, even where chess is popular, have endured long periods without a single specialized journal. When Capablanca died in 1942 there was no Cuban chess magazine to publish his obituary.

The sources quoted by Gaige are astonishingly far-ranging. Wherever possible he has made contact with the personalia themselves, or with their family; much information has also been obtained from funeral homes, cemeteries, local newspapers, university alumni records, professional directories, etc. Where death certificates have been obtained, the appropriate information is indicated. It is of interest to note (page 330) that the death certificate of Pillsbury, who, it used to be thought, died through excessive blindfold play, states that he succumbed to general paresis (i.e. syphilis). But there are traps too. Such figures as Fährndrich, Fleischmann and Takács had the pleasure of reading their own obituaries; Gaige carefully logs the false reports and retractions, notably in his magnificent 23-page appendix, an index of obituaries that appeared in the *BCM* between 1881 and 1986.

The entry for Steinitz (Elo Historical Rating: 2650) gives the reader 24 suggestions for further reading: magazine articles such as those in *•eskoslovenský Šach*, *Chess Monthly*, *Deutsches Wochenschach* and *Tidskrift för Schack*, as well as books on Steinitz by Bachmann, Devidé, Hannak, Hooper and Neishtadt. Modern sources

offering new research have not been overlooked: there is also mention of two significant Steinitz items in the 1986 *BCM*.

Steinitz's birthdate is given as '17 (14?) May 1836' (in Prague). When the evidence is mixed, Gaige shows which sources give which 'facts', and is not afraid to use question marks. He suggests that the forename of Lipschütz (born on 4 July 1863 in Ungvár, died on 30 November 1905 in Hamburg) was probably Sámuel, but notes other possibilities, including the *American Chess Bulletin's* use of 'Simon' in 1905 and 'Solomon' in 1906. In his Introduction to the earlier *Catalog*, Gaige quoted 11 contradictory sources of information about Rudolf Spielmann's birth and death dates, noting:

'All too often, people assume "if it's in print, it's true", especially if they are not warned that the underlying sources are so shaky. And let there be no doubt that they are. ... What is especially disconcerting is that none of [the sources of the Spielmann discrepancies] indicate that any of the dates are contradicted elsewhere.'

A quarter of a century of research has convinced Gaige that errors and contradictions abound. Writers frequently demonstrate lamentable carelessness, especially when an obituary has to be written at top speed with thin source material. Some magazines make do with a vague 'died recently' (which is little help to anybody), and even when precise dates are confidently given they cannot be accepted unquestioningly. Just because page 495 of the September 1979 *Chess Life & Review* categorically reported that Sidney Wallach had died on 1 July did not mean that Gaige would take this on trust. Further verification showed that Wallach's obituary had already appeared in *The New York Times* of 29 June. 'I truly wonder how the trick is done', commented Gaige drily at the time. The *Biobibliography* contains the correct death date: 24 June 1979.

Gaige is a brilliant sifter of evidence, and, unlike so many chess writers, when he doesn't know he says he doesn't know. The birth of Charles Jaffe is given simply as 'circa 1879, at Dubrovno'. The reasons for this are explained on page 45 of his 1980 booklet *A Catalog of U.S.A. Chess Personalia*, and are another example of the difficulties facing a chronicler:

'Charles Jaffe: just when was he born?
1879, in Dubrovna, according to *Jaffe's Chess Primer*, page 5;
1883, according to *Chess Review*, March 1933, page 2;
about 1876, in Dubrovno, according to his obituary in *The New York Times* of 12 July 1941, which said he died at age 65;
about 1881, according to *The Day and The Jewish Journal* (both New

York Yiddish newspapers), which said he died at age 60; 10 December 1887, in Dubrovno, according to the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature*, volume 4, columns 203-204; about 1878, according to the tournament book of Havava 1913, which gave his age at that time as 35;

As can be seen for the entry under Jaffe, I have settled upon *circa* 1879. But my own conjecture (which I do not put in the listings in this book) would be to assume that 10 December 1887 was a misprint for 10 December 1878. Further, I would suggest that the 10 December was Old Style, i.e. according to the Julian Calendar. If given according to New Style, i.e. Gregorian Calendar, the date would have been 22 December. Thus, in a confusion among the Jewish, Julian and Gregorian calendars, along with the confusion of a new world, an immigrant Jewish boy could have reasonably assumed that he was born in 1879. But who knows?’

How was it decided who would be included among the lucky 14,000 and who would have to be omitted? How can one reach conclusions about the relative ‘importance’ of people? The Introduction gives a detailed explanation of the difficult selection process, making the point that since ‘a prime goal of this book is to help provide the information on which to decide a person’s importance in the chess world’, it is necessary ‘to err on the side of inclusiveness’. This means that only very rarely will the reader not find a name he is seeking. When information is unavailable or uncertain, a gap is left for completion later on; it is clear that the very publication of a book of this kind will give rise to further discoveries from keen-eyed readers. As it stands, the book acknowledges assistance from a small band of helpers to whom Gaige circulated proof pages. His word-processor enables him to incorporate new information and publish updated listings with astonishing speed and accuracy.

The importance of precise data cannot be overestimated. In the case of more obscure people, the availability of exact death dates is the key to being able to trace back their lives through public records, newspaper reports, etc. Moreover, it is only when information is reasonably complete that cases of mistaken identity can be avoided. Gaige lists 24 Garcías, all but one of them still alive.

Who, then, will want a copy of this huge book? For chess writers in general (not just historians), as well as libraries, federations and clubs, it will prove an indispensable reference tool. But the ‘ordinary player’ too will turn to it again and again (certainly every time he has to play against a García). For browsing the work is an absolute joy.

The *Biobibliography* is one of the most useful chess books ever published, yet Jeremy Gaige would be the last person to claim that it is ‘definitive’. His work goes

on, an incomparable service to the game he loves.

Afterword: This article was first published on pages 58-60 of the 8/1987 *New in Chess*. See also C.N.s 3595 and 3609 for further tributes to the work of Jeremy Gaige.

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