

**The  
Last Ruy Lopez  
Tales from the Royal Game**

**Alexis Levitin**

**Foreword by Hans Ree**



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The Last Ruy Lopez  
Tales from the Royal Game  
by Alexis Levitin

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# Introduction

Chess has been my constant companion since the age of six. I learned the game from my father and my step-father. Those early mentors, two vastly differing father-figures, led to the stories “The Last Ruy Lopez” and “A Shadow’s Reach.” One story reveals a shared human acceptance of the other, father and son, a kind of final blessing, *in extremis*. The other records a mutual rejection of the possibility of love. In fact, there was ambivalence in my feelings towards both men, but I always was grateful for the gift of chess they gave me. Whatever conflicts and sufferings have come my way, chess has remained a kind of safe haven, an alternate world of stability, striving, and hope. It has woven itself into the fabric of my friendships, my travels, the journey of my being.

Travel, too, as these stories reveal, has been a way of life for me. I always feel more at home abroad than I do back home. So, chess and travel (and even the pleasant murmur of foreign tongues) play a major role in this book. Geography informs its very layout: the battles on the chessboard are scattered around the globe, many in different parts of the United States, but others in foreign climes, from Ecuador to Antarctica, from Portugal to Greece, from Spain to Sweden, from Australia to Polynesia, and then, in fiction, of course, on to an Intragalactic Chess Tournament on an unnamed

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planet. In the two stories presented under the rubric of Across all Borders, even the sorrows of geopolitics are touched upon.

Nature has also nourished me, wherever I go. I love the transparency of the Aegean Sea, the bracing kiss of the open Atlantic breaking on the coast of Portugal, the snow-capped heights of Spain's Picos de Europa. With nature as a backdrop, my stories, often based on reality, attempt to display the ambiguities of the human condition, with the Apollonian realm of chess offering its endless possibilities in a world of reason, while the perplexing human drama, with its uncontrolled Dionysian currents, intrudes with a baffling, at times battering, array of emotions, just beyond the edges of the chess board's solid border.

For me, these tales represent the rich weave of our human dilemma, caught as we are between the elegancies of the mind and the urgings of the blood, between reason and passion. I see us as creatures torn between conflicting attributes, hosting the quiet understanding of contemplation and the mysterious murmurings in our veins, creatures offered the real, while grasping for the ideal, vacillating between the palpable and the imagined. I see us as divided beings, burdened and blessed by the warring halves of our nature. For me, many battles, often only half-perceived, have occurred in and around the sanctified space of the chessboard. In depicting these struggles, I often try to gain some balance, some handle on the muddled world of emotions, through the quiet distancing of irony. And by doing so, I hope I have grown. I also hope that you, the reader, will find glimpses of yourself in these tales from the royal game and enjoy the encounters as much as I have enjoyed retelling them.

Alexis Levitin

Morrisonville, NY

June 2023

# Foreword

## Delights of Chess

It may not be the right way to approach literary works by wondering to what extent they are autobiographical, but here the question imposes itself. Alexis Levitin, a frequent contributor to *American Chess Magazine* and the *British Chess Magazine*, is an American retired professor of literature and a prolific translator, mainly of poetry by Brazilian and Portuguese writers. He is an avid chessplayer and a tireless traveler. Though a few of these stories are fantasies, most of them describe occurrences that could easily happen in real life, and the main character, sometimes called Sebastian and sometimes just referred to as “he” or “I,” has much in common with the public persona of the author.

Like Levitin, Sebastian is a man of letters. He travels many continents, armed with a travel chess set and the questions: “Do you speak English?” and “Do you play chess?” Both Sebastian and his creator Levitin have become a member of chess.com. Even if the stories may not always be strictly autobiographical, I think they can be described as an autobiography of sentiments that are evoked by the games that are played.

In the story that gives this collection its name, *The Last Ruy Lopez*, Sebastian plays against his father, who is 89 years old and still dapper, but hasn’t beaten his son for many years. The father wins however his last

game. Sebastian did honorably fight not to lose, but is happy that he did lose. The very next day, he receives the message that his father has died.

Early in the story there is this shocking sentence: “Sebastian, late in life, had discovered that his father’s parents, his own grandparents, had been shot in the back of the neck and shoved into the graves they had been forced to dig for themselves in the woods outside Riga.”

Here the question whether this is autobiographical really imposes itself. It must be. One doesn’t casually include such horror for literary effect; it must be true.

In the course of the book we learn that Sebastian has a son. Sometimes in his travels he has a female companion, not always the same one (once a Brazilian ballerina, no less) and obviously not the mother of the son.

In one story Sebastian is with his son Matthew, already an adult, on a Greek island. Of course he has his travel set with him. There is an arrogant waiter who is beaten at chess by Sebastian and reacts with the cheap snarl “Well, after all, it’s nothing but a game.” Sebastian feels depressed, which isn’t helped when Matthew tries to cheer him up by reminding him that he has won, and after all, isn’t it just a game?

Sebastian wishes that his own father had been present; he would have understood that it wasn’t really just a game. There is a certain imperfect symmetry to these two stories about fathers and sons and in this way we are reminded that you can never step in the same river twice, even if you reverse roles.

And then there is Room 101, where a certain Joseph, the best chessplayer in the history of planet Terra, is brought after arriving in a far corner of the universe to take part in the Intragalactic Chess Encounter.

In Orwell’s novel *1984*, Room 101 is the torture chamber where a prisoner confronts his worst fears. Joseph finds his Room 101 filled with



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small androgynous children, not more than five or six years old, who are all much better in chess than he, the best of Terra.

Because of the peculiarities of space travel, Joseph has left forever his fiancée, his mother and even the concept of love, which is unknown in the place that he has come to, where everyone is well-meaning in a purely rational way. His only hope left is that by diligent study he might be admitted to Room 102 and play against the twelve-year olds.

Near the end of the book, the author does away with invented names and reveals that his father Sergei Levitin was born in the Russian city Smolensk and his stepfather, the Russian émigré writer V.S. Yanovsky, in the Ukrainian city Poltava, on the road from Kharkiv to Kyiv.

While being reduced to playing on chess.com because of the pandemic, he muses about the many happy hours that chess, which for him has always been “a joyously drawn-out delight,” has brought him in combat all over the world. As he finds, for the first time, an opponent from Ukraine, he imagines a child in a wasteland, huddled over his computer screen. He feels guilty because of his own safety and comfort and wishes that by the magic of chess.com he could beam up his imagined opponent to the warmth and comfort of his own house.

Here is symmetry again. Levitin knows that the greater world is filled with conflicts and hatreds, but in the final story *Next Year in Jerusalem* he returns to his favorite theme: the joys of chess and the friendships that are fostered by it. It may not be a coincidence that, in the first story, executions in the woods near Riga are mentioned and, near the end of the book, the devastations of the war that is going on now. These elegant stories are a welcome reminder that chess has indeed the power to make us happy.

Hans Ree  
Amsterdam  
June 2023

# Dawn

Back in the old days there were quite a few chess parlors in the city, if you knew where to look for them. Since I was a denizen of the upper West Side, I used to play at local chess centers on 79th Street or on Broadway. The chess parlor on Broadway, now long gone, was a vast room filled with chess tables, folding chairs, and not much else. The lights were fluorescent and stayed on day and night. The place never closed.

Late on a windy evening in early June, I climbed the stairs to see what I might find. It was just after midnight and the only sounds were the humming of the florescent lights, the clicking of chess clocks, a murmur here and there, and the occasional thump as a Coke slid down the shoot in the soda machine. Chess players are notoriously immune to the normal diurnal cycle, so there were quite a few people scattered around the large room. Off in a corner, a group of onlookers surrounded two players. One of them was considered the best local talent among the late-night set. I joined the silent, almost somber, observers. The best guy was very good. It was a complex and tangled game, but finally the local hero won.

“Any chance of a game?” I asked.

He looked up and saw that I was no one.

“Why would I bother playing with you,” he said, as if terminating our exchange.

Late night feisty, I shot back “Well, if you’re so great, you can give me a handicap, what do you say to that?”

“What kind of a handicap?”

“Well, how about a pawn? Your king bishop pawn.” I didn’t want to be greedy, like a child.

“Ok. I’ll play you for five bucks.”

This was a long time ago and five bucks was worth something then.

“And I get White,” I added. I was greedy enough for that.

“OK. And don’t forget, the loser pays for our time, as well.”

“OK,” I said and sat down. As always, the solid, worn pieces felt comforting in my hand, as if they spoke for a realm beyond time, a realm of smoke-filled silence and contemplation. Our eyes on the board, we arranged our forces. And without another word, we began to play.

It was a game both careful and complex. Each of us had castled, there had been no exchanges, just a lot of maneuvering, mostly of the knights. Possibilities were rampant, but, in the present, the tangled richness on the board seemed to favor no one.

He went and got a coffee. I got a Coke. It was now 2 a.m. We played on in silence. My hands were cold and clammy, and I shivered now and then despite my light sweater. I knew that a single mistake would end the delicate balance on the board. His impregnable, imperturbable pawn structure alone made it clear he would not be the one to make a mistake. When you play someone clearly superior to yourself, it sometimes feels hard to breathe and even harder to imagine the future, any future. It is as if your opponent’s structure has left no chinks to be explored, no weaknesses to be tested and exploited, in a word, nowhere for your mind to go.

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On the other hand, I had made no overt blunder. And now it was already 4 a.m. and most of the tables stood empty. I saw no promising attack, but I couldn't see him breaking through either. I pondered my moves and persevered, hunkered down. But then something finally happened. He sacrificed a piece, in exchange for an opening on my kingside. Now I was up a piece, as well as the initial pawn handicap, but vulnerable, and he began, slowly, methodically, to draw my king forth, while weaving a complex net around him. By 5 a.m. it was clear there would be no miraculous escape. The tightening of the net was gradual, quietly assured, and implacable. I gazed at the hopeless situation and held out my hand. No one had spoken a word for five hours.

"I resign," I said, and handed him a five-dollar bill. He took the bill and slipped it into his wallet.

"You were better than I thought," he offered. I rose, shook his hand again, mumbled "good game," and went to the counter to pay the night clerk for our five hours. I trotted down the stairs, exhausted, but happy. I had not lost via a blunder, but because of his meticulous play, his imaginative scope. Because he was better.

Out on Broadway a cool dawn was seeping into the sky. Fat pigeons were strutting about as usual. A homeless man in a padded winter jacket was huddled asleep on a wrought-iron bench in the island in the middle of Broadway. The sun had not yet risen, but the new day was gathering itself. Shoulders hunched against the brisk morning breeze, I headed uptown toward where I lived. I was looking forward to my soft bed with its comforter. I would sleep till noon or even beyond. I had lost the game, but I was feeling fine. The chess had been good. The night had been well spent.