

Paul van der Sterren & Erwin l'Ami

Max Euwe World Champion!

The Champion Years 1935-1937

New In Chess 2026

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Preface

The origins of this book lie in the COVID-19 pandemic period, when the Max Euwe Center in Amsterdam, whose chairman I was at the time, decided to increase their digital activities in order to compensate for the forced closures during the lockdowns. We started by making a video series about the Euwe-Alekhine match in 1935. This was so well received that we also made a video lecture about the return match in 1937, and then another one about the match Euwe-Donner for the Dutch championship in 1955/56. All of a sudden, Max Euwe had become the central figure of the Max Euwe Center again!

During the preparatory work for these videos, I felt Euwe coming increasingly closer to me, not just as a chess player but also as a person. And I began to understand less and less why the man who had beaten Alekhine so magnificently in their first match had lost so badly in the return match. Had Euwe become a much weaker player in those two years? Had Alekhine become so much stronger? Neither of these hypotheses seemed right to me.

In short, almost without my noticing it, I began to examine the Euwe era more deeply. I looked at all the games Euwe played as World Champion, I read everything I could lay my hands on in the way of contemporary newspapers and magazines, and of course I read the relevant books. There were mainly two questions that I tried to find an answer to. First, how did his contemporaries view Euwe, the World Champion? And second, how were his results compared to those of Alekhine and other top players of the period? And who were those other top players actually?

So that was the idea. But then came the problem of turning the mess of unpresentable notes I had made into something that was presentable. This transformation, by far the most important stage in the writing of any book, was made possible by Remmelt Otten from the New in Chess publishing house above all. He very generously offered to publish the book both in Dutch and in English, allowing both the Dutch chess world, of which Euwe's legacy forms an essential part, and a global chess audience to be reached. Secondly, and no less importantly, my fellow grandmaster Erwin l'Ami showed himself willing to make a selection of Euwe's games from this period and analyse them in his well-known way: thorough yet casual, instructive yet light-hearted.

The result is a book in two parts. In Part I, I go through the two years of Euwe's World Championship step by step and try to formulate answers to the above questions. This part of the book is written in a narrative style, and all the chess material presented here is also discussed narratively rather

Max Euwe World Champion!

than technically. The second part of the book consists of twenty-four games analysed by my co-author Erwin l'Ami. Here, much more than in Part I, we hear the voice of the 21st century, as both the eagle-eyed engines and modern opening theory get drawn into the story. However, thanks to Erwin's unique talent to not let the engines dictate his thoughts, but to take their findings as the starting point for developing his own very profound views, the story never sounds like an engine story. In his analyses, the best of the engines and his own human brain are combined.

So the two parts of the book are, in effect, one. Two different perspectives, one ambition: to examine and show how Euwe played chess in his heyday. True, that was ninety years ago, but the lessons we can draw from his games are timeless. And in my modest opinion, they will remain so forever.

Paul van der Sterren
Amsterdam, december 2025

Introduction

In 1935, to the astonishment of almost the entire world, Dutchman Max Euwe defeated the supposedly unbeatable Alexander Alekhine in a long, gruelling match for the World Chess Championship. The thrilling final phase and the successful outcome of the match transposed the small, chess-loving country of the Netherlands into a state of euphoric joy. But even while the exuberant festivities were still in full swing, the first shadow over Euwe's World Championship was cast by former World Champion Emanuel Lasker, who, in a reflection on the match, outlined what he saw as the duties that now awaited the new champion. Though he was full of praise for Euwe's victory, his thoughts contained a serious, almost admonishing undertone: 'A great responsibility now awaits Euwe, because he has today accepted the legacy of Anderssen, Morphy, Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine. That is a series of resounding names. They have all enriched the history of chess, and it is our hope that the new world champion will now do his part to raise the science of the ancient game to a higher level. Yes, being a teacher, his time is limited, but the chess world has a right to expect this of him.'

It is quite something the way Lasker formulates his vision of the World Championship here, almost as an assignment to Euwe. It sounds to me as though he says: 'Well, young man, you've defeated Alekhine all right, that's nice, but now prove to us that you really belong in this lineage of world champions'. Yet, Lasker hits a lot of nails on the head in this one paragraph. To start with: *noblesse oblige*. Whoever bears a title must live up to the expectations attached to it, whether he wants to or not. And the time Euwe had for chess was indeed limited. In this respect, Euwe's case was very different indeed from that of his illustrious predecessors, who – ironically enough, with the exception of Lasker himself – devoted all of their time to chess.

Yet, regardless of how fair or unfair Lasker's views were, it is still an interesting question today, almost a century later: did Euwe succeed in this assignment that Lasker set him? What did he bring to 'the science of the old game'? And how did those two years in which he was the World Champion actually go? What happened during that time, and what were Euwe's role and position in it?

And then there is perhaps the most pressing question of all: why did Euwe lose in 1937 to the man he had defeated so convincingly two years earlier? Over the years, much has been said about this, but unfortunately the narrative that Alekhine launched into the world quite soon after that second match has strongly influenced, if not completely dominated, the historiography of this subject. Alekhine loved to take on the role of hero, so it was only natural for

him to make himself the hero of his own story. And a hero may sometimes lose, but he always comes back stronger. And so Alekhine came back stronger, at least in his own story.

This attitude was completely alien to Euwe. He was a man who, in most, if not all, aspects of his personality, was the polar opposite of Alekhine: he did not wish to make a hero of himself at all – not in 1935, not in 1937, and not at any point when he looked back in his later life.

So Alekhine's story could do with some nuance and correction. Heroic stories are, of course, very nice in themselves, but counterbalancing them with a more sober view will create a more complete picture. And who knows, this 'sober view' may become a heroic story in its own right, this time with Euwe in the leading role. Whether he would have wanted it or not.

CHAPTER 8

Stockholm 1937, ‘the seventh Olympiad’

The sun did not return to shine on me..., not in Stockholm at least, but I trust it'll come back some day. – Max Euwe (1937)

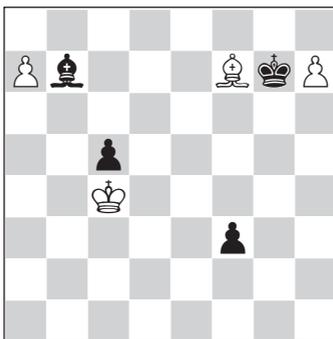
Just a few days after the tournament in Bad Nauheim, Stuttgart and Garmisch-Partenkirchen finished, the Olympiad in Stockholm started. The name ‘Olympiad’ is so well established nowadays that it is generally assumed to have always been used for this particular type of chess tournament. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the very first attempt to get this event going took place during the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924 as a side event. The truth is that before World War II, the event was simply spoken of as ‘the competition of national teams’ or ‘the competition of national teams for the Hamilton-Russell Cup’. The same goes for the 1937 edition. What has now entered the history books as ‘the seventh Chess Olympiad’ was then called ‘the sixth[!] competition of national teams for the Hamilton-Russell Cup’.

It quickly becomes clear that Euwe is in great shape after the event in Germany: he starts by winning his first six games! This feat is even more impressive when we consider his opponents. Among his victims are Petrovs (winner of the Kemerli tournament just a few months earlier), Keres, Mikenas and Stahlberg.

But the pattern repeats itself. After this series of six wins, followed by a draw against Pirc, Euwe again commits one of the biggest blunders of his career in a completely winning position against Lilienthal.

Max Euwe Andor Lilienthal

Stockholm 1937 (8)





Max Euwe playing Vladimirs Petrovs at the 1937 Stockholm Olympiad.
Photo: Leeuwarder Courant, August 3, 1937



Andor Lilienthal at the Hastings tournament of 1934/35.
Photo: De Telegraaf, August 10, 1937

Euwe has had the initiative throughout the entire game. Now, after seventy moves, it looks like he has finally broken Lilienthal's tough resistance. But...

Here is what Euwe himself has to say about this moment:

71. ♖d5??

'A hallucination.' White had only counted on 71... ♖xd5. Correct would have been 71. ♖g6, when after 71...f2 72. ♖d3 ♖e4 73. ♗xc5 White wins easily.

71...f2!

'Winning on the spot. After 72. ♖xb7 f1♔ is check so that White loses his a-pawn. Therefore, White resigned.'

A cool, analytical reflection, typical of the Euwe we have come to know by now. Neither is there any soul-searching in an evaluation of his play after the tournament: 'In the first week, I played very well, in the second it was not so good. The reason for this great difference is hard to pinpoint.' But then he adds an interesting observation: 'After losing the game against Lilienthal, I suddenly felt very insecure when evaluating a position and in comparing different possibilities.' This is indeed exactly what committing a gross blunder does to you, even when you are a great player.

In later years, he used more poetic words when talking about this historic blunder: 'The sun did not return to shine on me...', though he went on to more or less correct himself by adding matter-of-factly: 'not in Stockholm at least, but I trust it'll come back some day.'

The newspaper headline the following day, 'Euwe depressed by his loss against Lilienthal', probably wasn't far off the mark. How could it have been otherwise?

After this tragedy, in his last games of this gruelling long Olympiad (nineteen rounds in fifteen days, Euwe played thirteen games), Euwe's play no longer had the sparkle it had in the first half of the tournament. He still played a good game against Piazzini in the next round (and won), but this may have been because games were adjourned in those days and sometimes couldn't be finished for several days. His game against Lilienthal was adjourned, and on the day Euwe played Piazzini, it wasn't finished yet, so he must have still been in the winning mood. With a won game against Lilienthal in the bag (or so he thought), Euwe must have felt assured of a truly phenomenal score of 8½ out of 9.

The dramatic finish to this adjourned game cannot but have been a terrible blow for Euwe. Gone was the 8½ out of 9 score, gone his unbeaten record, gone – at least for the moment – his courage and equanimity. And the time for recovery was short, because right after his game against Lilienthal was finished, the next opponent awaited him. It was not like Euwe to withdraw

from an important match, especially as the Netherlands still had a chance to win the Olympiad and this was the crucial match against the top favourite, the USA. Euwe managed to salvage a draw from a lost position against Reshevsky, which would have been a considerable feat even under the best of circumstances. But on the next day, the fairy tale ended abruptly. Against Thorsten Gauffin from Finland, Euwe lost control, got drawn into the swamp by his little-known opponent, and was finally crushed on the kingside.

It may be worth adding that in the next round, Gauffin also beat Keres. The Stockholm Olympiad must have been an absolute highlight in the chess career of this otherwise fairly unremarkable player.

Euwe concludes the tournament with a tame draw against Tartakower and an easy win against Jens Enevoldsen. His score: 9½ out of 13. Not bad at all, of course, not even for a World Champion, but what a difference between the first half of the tournament and the second!

At least one attenuating circumstance must be mentioned here, if only because it reveals a character trait of Euwe's that is destined to grow ever more prominent in the years to come: his sense of responsibility. During the last days of the Olympiad, the accursed FIDE congress took place, where FIDE managed to make a mess of the World Championship cycle, as we have seen in an earlier chapter. In his capacity as the World Champion, Euwe considered it his responsibility to take a prominent part in the discussion. The disappointing outcome must have hit him hard after all the time and energy he had spent on the matter. The shock of the Lilienthal game wasn't the only blow he had to digest.

Perhaps this is always a downside to such social involvement. If a man is well-intentioned and full of energy and great plans, but the world gives him nothing in return but indifference and obstruction, the backlash of disenchantment may be severe. Bearing in mind the many responsibilities Euwe took upon himself in later years, culminating in the FIDE presidency from 1970 until 1978, this disappointing experience didn't hold him back for long. But the final days of the Stockholm Olympiad must have been tough: 'The sun did not return to shine on me.'

Efim Bogoljubow (1889-1952) belonged to the world elite for decades and played two matches for the world title. Both times, he lost without a chance to Alekhine: 15½-9½ in 1929 and 15½-10½ in 1934.

The Bogo-Indian Defence (1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 ♘b4+ was named after Bogoljubow, and he has also enriched the theory of other opening lines. Bogoljubow was always a difficult opponent for Euwe, and regularly in their mutual games, things happened that could hardly stand the light of day.

Perhaps the most notorious example is the following game.

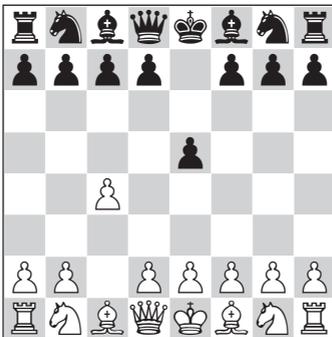
Game 4

Efim Bogoljubow

Max Euwe

Zandvoort 1936

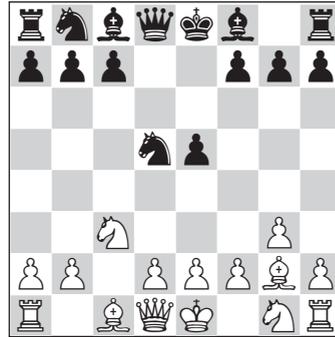
1.c4 e5



During his entire career, this was never Euwe's main reply to 1.c4, and it's easy to understand why this is so. With White, he mainly played 1.d4, and therefore, he didn't often get Sicilians on the board. Also, on 1.e4, the move 1...c5 was not his favourite

reply; it was mainly later in his career that he experimented with it. After 1.c4 e5, in essence, a Sicilian with reversed colours arises, and I suspect that Euwe never found that type of position very attractive.

**2.♗c3 ♗f6 3.g3 d5 4.cxd5 ♖xd5
5.♘g2**

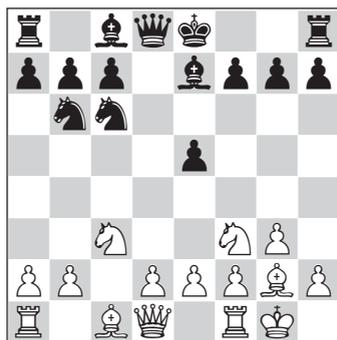


5...♗b6

Black has to spend a tempo with this knight, since it cannot be maintained on d5. After 5...♘e6 6.♗f3 ♖c6 7.0-0 Black has a problem, since 7...♘e7 8.d4 exd4 9.♗b5! gives White strong pressure, and 7...♗d7 8.♗g5! is also unpleasant. Another important point is that 7...♗c5 is strongly met by 8.♗xe5! ♖xe5 9.d4. The extra tempo White has here in comparison to the Accelerated Dragon (1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♖c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 g6) means that Black cannot achieve the most critical set-up. This allows White to play for an advantage.

In recent years, however, another move has cropped up as an alternative for 5...♗b6, namely 5...♗f6, which is also quite playable.

6.♗f3 ♖c6 7.0-0 ♘e7

**8.a4**

Here we see that this variation of the English Opening was still in its infancy at the moment this game was played. White's 8th move is only strong if the pawn can move further to a5 (and possibly a6), but Black's reply puts a simple stop to that.

8...a5

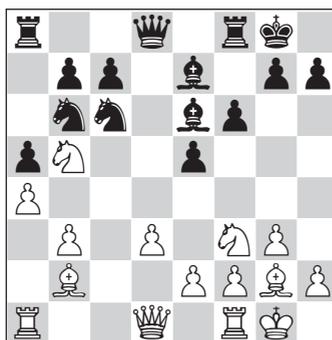
Now, the b3- and b4-squares have been weakened, and since Black still has ...c7-c6 at hand, White doesn't even get the b5-square back for it.

9.d3

Presumably, it would have been best for White here to steer for equality with 9.d4 exd4 10.♘b5. After 10...0-0 (10...♙f6 11.♙f4 ♘d5 12.♗fxd4! is dangerous for Black) 11.♗fxd4 ♘xd4 12.♙xd4 ♙xd4 13.♗xd4 c6, Black is comfortable, but probably not more than that.

9...♙e6 10.b3 0-0

There is nothing wrong with this move, but Black could also have opted for the aggressive 10...♙d7 11.♙b2 0-0-0!?. The idea is to quickly storm the kingside with ...h7-h5-h4, and it's not easy for White to find counterplay.

11.♙b2 f6 12.♗b5**12...♗b4!**

By playing the knight to the wonderful b4-square, Black also introduces the threat of ...c7-c6. Since 13.d4 is strongly met by 13...e4 14.♗d2 f5, White lacks a good plan.

13.♙c1 c6 14.♗a3 ♙d7 15.♗c4 ♗xc4

This exchange brings White some relief. For that reason, Black would have done better to continue 14...♗d7 15.♗c4 ♙e8. Then, he can calmly strengthen his position with ...♙c7, ...♙ad8, ...♗c5, etcetera.

16.bxc4 ♙fd8 17.♗d2 ♙c7

Prophylaxis against 18.f4, which would now be met by 18...♗xd3 19.exd3 ♙b6+. Now White could perhaps have played 18.♗h1 to reintroduce the idea of f2-f4.

18.♗b3 ♙b6 19.♙a1 ♙d7 20.♗d2 ♙ad8 21.♙b3 ♙a6 22.♙fd1

As a consequence of Black's somewhat indecisive play, White is entirely back in the game again. Now, 22.♙c3 was interesting, with the idea to grab the initiative by means of ♙b2 and f2-f4.

22...♙a7 23.♙b1 ♙b8 24.♙f1

24.d4!? might have radically changed the course of the game. Here, 24...exd4 25.♖e4 ♕f7 26.♙h3 ♜bd8! is highly unclear.

24...♜dd8

Presumably, both players thought White was better after 24...b5 25.cxb5 cxb5 26.axb5, since 26...♜xb5 loses the exchange to 27.♙c6!. However, Black can start with 26...♜dd8 and take back on b5 on the next move.



25.♠c3

A move that is hard to explain. Were the players in time trouble here? The curious move sequence that now follows seems to indicate that, but I have not been able to find anything about it in the sources available to me. In view of the time limit – 30 moves in 2 hours, followed by one hour for every 15 moves – it does seem logical that the clock played a role here.

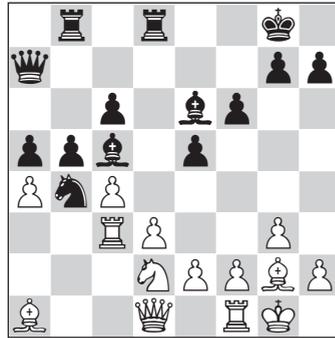
25...b5

Of course!

26.♙d1 ♘a2 27.♠c2 ♘b4 28.♠c1 ♘a2 29.♠c2 ♘b4 30.♠c1 ♙a6

The queen is not optimally placed here. Centralization with 30...♙d7 deserved preference.

31.♠c3 ♙f8 32.♠c1 ♙a7 33.♠c3 ♙c5



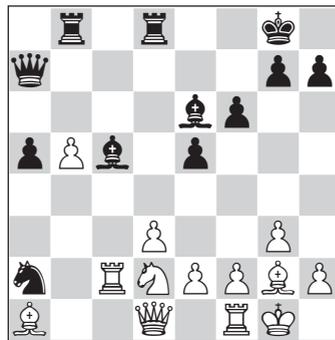
34.axb5

Bogoljubow doesn't want to wait any longer. Soon, this will turn out to be a golden move.

34...cxb5 35.cxb5 ♘a2

Presumably, Euwe didn't want to allow 35...♜xb5 36.♙a4 and therefore attacks the rook first. Nevertheless, here after 36...♙d7 Black is still better. Also 35...a4!? certainly deserved attention.

36.♠c2



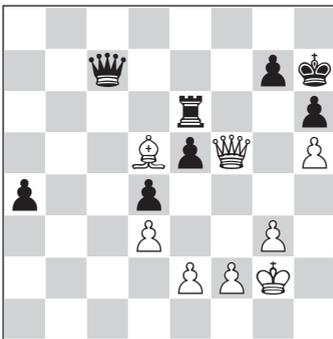
36...♠xb5

A horrible blunder, just before the time control!

37.♠xa2 ♙xa2 38.♙a4

And that's it – a classic double attack against the rook and the bishop. Bogoljubow has little trouble converting.

38...♖db8 39.♜xa2+ ♔h8 40.♙c6
 ♜5b6 41.♙a4 ♙d4 42.♙xd4 exd4
 43.♞c4 ♜b4 44.♙c6 ♜c7 45.♙f3
 a4 46.♞g2 h6 47.h4 ♜d7 48.h5 ♜b3
 49.♜a1 ♜8b4 50.♜d2 ♜c7 51.♜f4
 ♜d7 52.♜e4 ♜b1 53.♜xb1 ♜xb1
 54.♜a8+ ♔h7 55.♞e5 ♜c7 56.♜e8
 fx5 57.♜f8 ♜b6 58.♙d5 ♜e6 59.♜f5+



Black resigned. This must have been a particularly frustrating game for Euwe.

Géza Maróczy (1870-1951) was the senior player in the Zandvoort tournament, but he was certainly no pushover: ending on 5½ out of 9, he was a fully-fledged contestant. Maróczy was an important figure in Euwe's chess career and was his mentor in the latter's younger years. Born in Hungary, he was at his peak around the beginning of the 20th century and seemed destined to become World Champion Emanuel Lasker's challenger then. However, it never came to a match. Maróczy is also known for the pawn structure with white pawns on c4 and e4 that

was named after him, and which can arise from different openings. This game yielded Euwe the brilliancy prize and a corresponding 60 guilders. He makes an intuitive piece sacrifice, which may rightly be called speculative, but then he took the game into his hands with powerful play. It makes me think of what Veselin Topalov once confided to me: 'It's much easier to attack than to defend.'

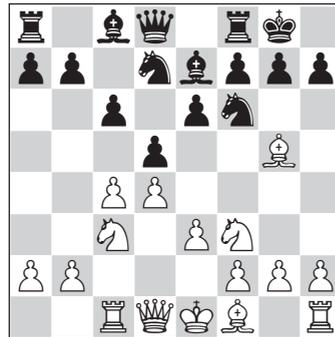
Game 5

Max Euwe

Géza Maróczy

Zandvoort 1936

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♞c3 ♞f6 4.♙g5 ♙e7
 5.e3 0-0 6.♞f3 ♞bd7 7.♜c1 c6



8.a3

A well-known theme in the Orthodox Queen's Gambit. White postpones the development of his light-squared bishop to avoid the tempo loss after ♙d3 dxc4 ♙xc4.

8...h6 9.♙f4

Doubtlessly the right square. 9.♙h4 would give Black the opportunity to liberate his position with 9...♞e4 10.♙xe7 ♜xe7.