

Translation by Miroslaw Reczko

A chess genius from Stawiska – Akiba Rubinstein¹

Akiba Rubinstein was born in Stawiski in 1882. He was the fourteenth child in his family. He was born approximately eight months after his father died of tuberculosis, and he was named Akiba after his father.

His father was one of the outstanding students of Rabbi Shimon Sofer of Krakow. He was the son of Rabbi Yaakov Yonatan Rubinsztejn, the rabbi of Grajewo, one of the students of the Chatam Sofer who received rabbinical ordination from him at the age of eighteen.

His mother Reizel was the second daughter of the well-known philanthropist Reb Aharon Eliezer Denenberg, who became rich through the forestry business and donated a great deal of his fortune to the benevolent societies of Stawiski. Reb Aharon Eliezer Denenberg visited the Land of Israel and built a synagogue in Jerusalem that stands to this day. Every Wednesday, sixty Yeshiva students ate at his table, in honor of the birth of his son who was born after three daughters.

When Akiba's mother became a widow, it was very hard for her to take care of her many children, who were weak. Indeed, most of them died in their childhood or youth. During his childhood, the Rubinsztejn family moved to Bialystok after his mother married Rabbi Heller, who was known as “The Genius (Illuy) of Pinsk”. Akiba was educated in Bialystok along with Chaim, the son of the Illuy of Pinsk, who was the same age as him. Chaim was also a genius, who later became known as Professor Chaim Heller, a researcher into the sources of the bible in the traditional style. In his time, he was known as one of the spiritual leaders of Orthodox Judaism in the United States.

Due to his physical weakness during his childhood and youth, and out of fear for the tuberculosis that was prevalent at that time, he was not sent to Yeshiva as was customary in

¹ Text from the *Memorial Book of the Jewish community in Stawiska* (text Akiva Fet).

those days. During his many free hours that he had at his disposal, he played chess in one of the inns that was close to his home. He would often “play with himself”, that is to say he would study detailed chess operations that would later bear fruit. Within a short period of time, he made a name for himself as an expert chess player. When the famous chess player of Lodz, a place known as an important chess center, visited Bialystok, Akiba presented himself before him. As the guest evaluated him, it was proven that the young Rubinstein was a gifted chess player, and the guest invited him on the spot to participate in the chess championships of Lodz. During that competition, Akiba beat the best chess players in the city hands down, and to the surprise of everyone, he won the chess title of Lodz. After this brilliant victory, Akiba Rubinstein became a well-known national chess personality. He was invited to competitions in other cities, and he continued progressing until he was invited to the Russian national chess championships in St. Petersburg in 1909, where the most experienced chess players in all of Russia participated, including the world chess grandmaster Dr. Emanuel Lasker. To the surprise of everyone, young Akiba Rubinstein tied for first place in this national competition along with Lasker, and became a known chess personality in the entire world. From that time on, he was invited to the most important international competitions.

During these competitions, he reached heights that very few people reached in the annals of chess. He won first place in the four largest international chess championships, as he brilliantly defeated the chess giants. Apparently, he reached the height of his success in the San Sebastian competition in Spain (1912).

His many fans raised his standings in the world chess championships. However, the world grandmaster, Dr. Emanuel Lasker, ignored the opinion of the international chess community and invited the chess expert Schlechter to compete against him for the world title. This refusal of Dr. Lasker to invite Rubinstein, who was regarded as one of the chess greats in those days, was never forgotten. When the world chess championships were reinstated after the Second World War, this incident was brought down by the grandmaster Botvinnik as a convincing reason to disallow the chess grandmaster from deciding who his competitor would be for the championship.

Akiba Rubinstein made many innovations in the theory of chess, and a collection of his plays that was published serve as educational material for chess players until this day. His brilliant games were included in the chess textbooks (e.g. in that of Dr. Euwe, a former chess grandmaster).

He married a woman from the Lev family of Szczuczyn during the First World War. He and his wife had two sons, Yonatan and Shlomo. He settled in Brussels, Belgium after the war. Many of the chess experts of the cities of the Low Countries were numbered among his students.

After the First World War, his health became shaky, and he began to suffer from headaches and nervousness. This affected his game. With the passage of time, his game suffered greatly, and he lost games of the second and third level. Despite this, even then he attained fine accomplishments as he played against great competitors, and he won prizes for the most sportsmanlike game.

He visited the Land of Israel in 1931. This was an uncommon event in the annals of chess in the Land. His health degenerated completely around the time of the Second World War, and he fell into depression. He became a loner, and withdrew from communal life. His economic situation also weakened, for he made a living from chess for all of his life. Chess institutions published his games in books, and he was supported from the proceeds.

During the Second World War, he was hidden in Belgium by his fans, and he remained alive. His youngest son was sent to a concentration camp, and survived due to his brilliant game, for the Nazi camp commander, who himself was a good chess player, did not want to forgo such a chess competitor.

His wife tended to him with boundless dedication and took care of all of his needs. After her death, he entered an institution where he remained until the end of his life.