

Robert Hübner:

‘I have seen that I don’t understand too much about chess’



Robert Hübner: ‘You cannot read this book, on which I have worked for four thousand hours, in five minutes, that much is clear.’ (Photo: Gerard de Graaf)

Sixteen years ago, an aggrieved and disappointed Robert Hübner turned his back on the press. Their world was not his world. A prolonged period of public silence ensued. Until the greatest German chess player of the post-War era, much to our pleasure and considerable pride, did accept our invitation for an interview. In two lengthy sessions the Cologne grandmaster and papyrologist talked with candour and dedication about his views and passions. In flawless Dutch he touched on the wondrous possibilities of language, the difficulty of chess, the press shyness of Bobby Fischer compared to his own and the warped democratic notion that quantity is quality. All this, and more, with frequent reference to his legendary stupidity. Or: a brief course on how a victory of reason over emotion could help man's progress.

by Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam

A is A. And matter exists. On these seemingly simple axioms Robert Hübner builds his life view. They also prove to be an illuminating starting point for our talk. A talk that came about when finally my insistence wore down his doubts and reservations. The subjects we are to touch on have not been specified. 'We'll see', Hübner said matter-of-factly when I phoned him up a couple of days before we were to meet at my place. With typical self-mockery he added: 'It doesn't matter too much, as I know nothing anyway.' That sounded familiar and encouraging. Anyone who has ever talked to Hübner knows the shrug of his shoulders and the curl of his lower lip when he dismisses references to his erudition before he proceeds to a brief exposé on his stupidity.

So, as a good host I try to put my guest at ease when I start the first session with a show of my own stupidity. Prompted by the several occasions that I happened to meet him at breakfast during chess tournaments reading Plato, I ask him about his admiration for the Greek philosopher. And, once he has told me about his first acquaintance with *Gorgias* in grammar school and his growing interest in Plato during his Greek studies at university, I try to find a link between the axioms mentioned above and a remark Hübner made years ago in a philosophical discussion. With a surprised look he explains that these axioms have nothing to do with Plato, but that I should rather think of Kant's epistemology.

Fortunately, sometimes luck favours the stupid. As he further explains his fundamental attitude towards reality, we smoothly enter the world according to Robert Hübner.

'I think indeed that this is how it is: reality exists, but we can never be certain that we truly grasp reality with our senses and our mind. Seeing an object, one person might perceive this as one thing, another as something else. Giving different names to an object may be a matter of language, but it can also indicate a different grasp of reality. You never can prove anything about the existence of reality. No matter how much man measures, his approach is always subjective. The larger part of humanity agrees on certain things because the construction of our brains is identical. But is this as they truly are? A fly may perceive them quite differently.'

'My footing in this world is not that firm'

Why do you think this? Because you read this somewhere?

'Of course, it is also an emanation of a certain feeling of life: an uncertainty about everything one thinks and sees. Nothing is ever certain for me. 'Ah, so that's how it is.' That feeling I don't know; my footing in this world is not that firm.'

It is tempting to look for a connection between this insecurity and your occupations. Your attempts to get a grip on a number of separate mini-worlds. Chess is a world on its own, as is the philology of a dead language like old Greek, and even Finnish, given the small number of people that study that language, may be seen as a clearly separate field.

'In chess it is important that - theoretically speaking - you have full information about all the forces at work on the board. You can think that you may come to a convincing solution of a question if you are diligent. In any case this attempt looks promising compared to an attempt to understand the chaos of the world. In chess you have a well-defined, limited world, in which you have a fair

chance to see what you are doing; you can make good attempts at verification and falsification.

Philology is different. With chess man has created a separate world; in philology you deal with many facets of life. Being occupied with ancient Greek also involves dealing with history. The study of philology, much more so than dealing with chess, is an attempt to approach man, to get a grasp on the subjective side of life.

Man tries to depict reality through language. This is why language is of great importance. The common translation of 'philologist' as 'a person who loves the word' is, of course, not correct at all. 'Logos' does not mean 'the word'. Here this word has been translated just as wrongly as in the Bible. The translation 'In the beginning was the Word' is utterly wrong. A philologist is a person who loves the 'logos': thought as it is reflected in language.'

In the beginning was...?

'Was the logos. This word has gone through a long development. I don't know what it is supposed to mean here. I think that the person who used it was not too sure either. For he says: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' Of course, that is self-contradictory. The Word cannot be, a) with God, and b) be God. I think that because he didn't know exactly what he was talking about, he tried to make his listeners drowsy by his rhetoric.'

He was trying to create a certain feeling.

'You can compare it to the politicians of our days, who use expressions that have a good ring, but essentially mean nothing. I am still amazed when people say that the beginning of the gospel according to St. John is so impressive. I've never understood this. To me they are only words, and once I start to think about them I am soon stuck. But I have digressed.'

Not quite. We were talking about the fact that philology is not only a secluded world, but that it also takes a keen interest in the subjective side of life.

'Yes. Language is an old and impressive tool, and also a wonderful toy. I am really astounded that this fact is so little appreciated today.'

It annoys you if people are sloppy with language.

'Yes. It indicates that they are not interested in it. I have often people heard saying: 'It's enough if others understand what I mean.' To me that is rather disquieting, as in fact it makes you lose the basis for communication. If somebody says, oh well, you know what I mean, and someone else doesn't or doesn't want to understand, it becomes a mess. If you start neglecting the most important tool of approach to reality, you will end up in chaos. That's my feeling.'

I remember I once made a remark about the insufficiency of language to express feelings. You reacted by saying that, on the contrary, it was a miracle how much one can express with language.

'Yes, that is correct. This reminds me of something I read the other day by a fairly unknown modern philosopher, Günther Anders. His main work is called *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (The Obsolescence of Man). He also writes about the indifference with which language is treated these days, saying that people excuse this by arguing that one cannot express feelings with language. He thinks it is just the other way around. There is nothing wrong with language, but the people deliver poor work; it is only a sign of laziness if somebody says, I have this feeling, but I cannot express it.'

This accuracy may be exaggerated. Occasionally, when I asked you something about one of your games and tried to repeat in my own words what I thought you had said, you quite frequently stated: 'Well, that is not really what I said.'

'Certainly, it can be exaggerated, but I always strive to try and express myself as precisely and clearly as possible.'

Have you written things that gave you the feeling that you had expressed yourself adequately?

'Yes, sometimes I have been fairly satisfied with my modest writings.'

'I am quite content if I reach one or two persons'

And do you feel that others, who read you, do understand you?

'Not often, but of course most people don't care what I write. They have a completely different opinion about analyzing chess games or another view of the world. But you can never write for everyone. I am quite content if I reach one or two persons. That's already more than you can expect, I think. I have my own views: whether they are shared by someone else I do not know.'

I am of the opinion that one shouldn't constantly watch the reaction of others when writing; one has to be convinced oneself about the solidity of one's work. It's not important whether others like it or find it interesting. On the other hand, I believe that it is pointless to write if you never reach anybody. But I still hope that I reach a couple of people. In any case the possibility exists, because after all what I am expressing isn't that difficult.'

You are not very fond of compromises, tend to stick to your convictions. Because of earlier deceptions or because you are convinced of the correctness of your own views?

'No, I never know if my approach is correct or not. I think that sticking to one's convictions is a matter of character; it doesn't spring from experience. If you'd rely on experience you'd always say: 'Oh well, let's come to a compromise. It takes less energy and is economically more profitable.' But I believe that it is psychologically unhealthy always to make compromises. If you think: 'This is how it is,' and others disagree and because of this you change your convictions or attitude: this is not healthy. If I have decided: 'This is how it is. I've worked hard on this and thought about it, this is my conviction,' then I should stick to that.

Of course there are limits to this unwillingness to compromise. In practical matters I may give in a bit, because it is not so important. I think I am fairly flexible there, though others might disagree. I am less flexible as to the results of thinking. You cannot say: 'One and one makes two, but it may as well be something else.' I see no room for compromise or flexibility there.'

Do the axioms you start from and the logical laws that result from these axioms provide a good basis in practical life?

'Yes, I think so. I am still alive. I am more satisfied with my own explanation of the world than the other explanations I sometimes hear, with God or inexplicable radiation or whatever. They allow me to have a coherent world view that is nowhere contradictory.'

'Progress could be made if reason could gain supremacy over emotions'

Departing from your axioms it does not seem very likely that this life is leading anywhere.

'That's right, it does not lead anywhere. The contrary assumption is, among other reasons, the result of man overestimating his uniqueness. He has all these beautiful feelings and thinks: 'I am so important, surely I cannot be gone forever one day'. Well, I think he can. If I said about a dog's life that it has to lead somewhere, I would convince few people, but I would certainly convince the dogs. Looking at history, I see no changes in the course events take. The way human society operates remains deplorable. No matter if you talk about the Peloponnesian war or the twentieth century, it's all a lot of misery, which according to my opinion sprouts from actions caused by emotions, which perhaps in earlier times of man's development were necessary to survive, but which now disrupt society. Progress could be made if reason could gain supremacy over emotions. I believe that this idea is influenced by my reading of Plato: man should make an attempt to control his emotions with the help of correct reasoning. If I am informed correctly, psychologists advocate the opposite course these days.'

Do you try to shield yourself off from the outer world with your activities? Or do you secretly still cherish a hope, however small, that you might contribute to a certain progress?

'Through the years I have become less and less optimistic. I don't think I can contribute to any progress, even if I had that thought when I was young, albeit not through chess but through major scholarly achievements. I no longer think this. The things I do now may actually be seen as a kind of flight, or perhaps I do them because I like doing them. I do not see a possibility to be useful part of this society and to do something that is generally appreciated, to fulfil a function that is both pleasant to me and of use to society.

Not a great surprise, as business is the principal concern in our society. The question people care about when they say something is not: 'Is this right? Is this correct? Can I live with this?', but the question: 'What will it bring me in money or economic profit?' This tendency has always existed, but I believe it is extremely strong now. Little is said independently of economic reasons; you constantly have to advertise yourself and your products. I don't mean to say that the times are that bad, there are also many good sides to it, but this is a phenomenon I find difficult to cope with.'

You don't feel that just like there has been technological progress, there has been progress from a civilization point of view too?

'What is progress from a civilization point of view? More people can read. And it's certain that man has never in history been so well off materially as we are in Europe now. I and most other people can live without any material worries. But nevertheless worries are forced upon you by politicians, the press and commercials. Emotionally, life has not improved. People take little advantage of all the material possibilities that are at our disposal. Essentially, everybody has the time and the means to learn something, to concentrate on art or literature, whatever. Yet, I see few people profit from this unique situation. On the contrary, they do not know what to do.'

You systematically avoid modern media like television and newspapers.

'Yes, I take no interest in them and try to allow them into my life as little as possible. You have to limit yourself in life. I decided they were not important and sometimes even unpleasant.'

I once referred to a John Cleese joke and you said: 'Who is John Cleese?' I replied, 'Well, you know, Monty Python.' And you asked, 'Who is Monty Python.' That doesn't sound very practical.

'Practical? Sometimes there may be a lack of communication. On the other hand, I don't think it is possible to communicate on everything with everybody. I have excluded part of this world, and I for my part have interests like Finnish or ancient Greek that I cannot discuss with everyone either. But you cannot socialize with everybody; at least that is not my aim.'

'My feelings are totally unimportant to others; only my thoughts are interesting'

Was this part of the problem when as a chess player you became a public figure and were confronted by the press?

'I think there were two problems. One is that the press always aims to reach as many people as possible. For this purpose you have to simplify matters strongly, and that I don't want to do.'

The second and more important problem is that it is the press's first and foremost aim to stir up emotions. For example by trying to elicit emotional statements from me when they want to enable the consumer to identify with my person. I am of the opinion, however, that my feelings are totally unimportant to others; only my thoughts are interesting. I want to decide for myself which emotions I want to show and which not. Once you present yourself publicly, your aim should be to improve other people's knowledge. I know more about chess than some others; I can explain a thing or two about chess. But I am not inclined to partake in silly babbling. As I already said, the aim should be to improve the knowledge of mankind. That's what I would like to do, but obviously the press wants something else.'

You had more or less given up on that wish. If I recall your last appearance on German television, a couple of years ago after a studio game against Kasparov...

'To begin with, the agreement was different. We had agreed that I was not going to say anything. Yet, I was asked by Pflieger (the German grandmaster who presented the program- DJtG) to react to what Kasparov had said: that I had played fast and well. My answer was that I did play fast, but that I didn't know if I played well. I wanted to oppose a trend that certainly Pflieger adheres to. He wants to create the impression that chess has a few 'secrets' and that for the rest everything is quite simple. I wanted to stress that for me and anyone else who plays it, chess is very difficult, so that you cannot simply state whether a move or a game was good or bad.'

Early on in your career you made several attempts at co-operation.

'Yes, when I was twenty or slightly older. This happens when you have no experience. I had never watched television. I assumed that the press people would at least aim for a high level, even though they might not attain it, and that they really wanted to know something.'

So, if you lent them a helping hand everything would turn out fine.

'Yes, exactly. 'I am fully prepared to co-operate and so, surely, are they.' That's what I thought. Now I know that I was naïve, but of course when you're young you are naïve. But all in all I didn't try it that often. Mostly it was connected to a Candidates' match and then finally with *Der Spiegel* in 1981. I made a couple of attempts and saw that it didn't work.'

Did a difference in mentality also play a role? Following your second place behind Fischer in Palma de Mallorca in 1970 a good section of the press was eager to write that there was a German world champion in the making.

‘Well, they are always ready to use you to arouse emotions, national emotions in this case. Arousing national emotions I find particularly revolting.’

Even when he is playing chess, Robert Hübner is faithfully referred to in Germany as Dr Hübner. Having completed his studies of Greek and Latin he continued to work at Cologne University from 1974 to 1982. At the request of his professor he had specialized in papyrology. He deciphered Greek texts that he found on papyri of the university collection and published them, together with a philological and historical commentary. After he had left the university he continued to publish such texts, albeit less frequently. At the beginning of our second session I ask him about the nature of these texts.

‘There is an essential difference between literature and the texts from everyday life I almost exclusively worked with. All these texts came from Egypt. Mostly they are of a legal nature, bills of sale, everything connected with taxes, but also private letters. You can expect anything, scraps of music or arithmetic, or any other matter.’

Egypt became a Greek state around 330 B.C., after Alexander the Great had destroyed the Persian empire, of which Egypt had been a part, under Ptolemaios I. Greek was the first official language in Egypt up to the Arabic invasion in 635. Egypt became a Roman province under Augustus, but Greek remained the main language. I didn’t have many papyri from the Ptolemaean era; they were mostly Roman and Byzantine, between 0 and 600 C.E. Deciphering these texts is very difficult. The individual results are not very fascinating, but taken together these papyri give you a good impression of life in that period; they are the best source for everyday life in antiquity. You have to work very carefully and draw conclusions with accuracy, which I found interesting, but if you were to do this for the rest of your life it might become a bit one-sided. I do not miss it terribly.’

Did you like the idea of being a chess player who at the same time had a solid academic background? A clear sign that you were capable of more?

‘It is true that to me chess is not an important activity; I always found my other activities more valuable. I felt a need to show that I was capable of more than only pushing wood. It had nothing to do with social recognition, which you won’t get in this field anyway. I had to prove it to myself.’

What was it that gave you more satisfaction, a good chess result or a publication on papyri?

‘This always fluctuated. When I was playing chess I longed for my philological work and vice versa. This is a perfect way to remain dissatisfied.’

Did you try to see chess as an abstract world, independent of everything else?

‘It’s a world of its own. As an activity of the brain it has little to do with anything else. To me it always mattered that it was a creative activity. This doesn’t imply that it is art, which is something completely different, but certainly you have to muster creativity and have ideas. For me a game, once it is finished, has always been a piece of work: I want to hand in a good piece of work. That is the most important aspect of playing chess for me.’

And who or what is the touchstone?

‘My own analysis, and the impression that I have. Of course you can never prove which game is good or which one is bad.’

You have always made very deep analyses of your games. Weren’t you too merciless on yourself?

‘I don’t think it was a matter of mercy or lack of mercy. I did what I could and by doing so I have seen that I do not understand too much of chess.’

Despite this poor understanding you managed an international breakthrough at the age of 21, when you finished second in the 1970 Interzonal tournament of Palma de Mallorca. The words of praise that the winner, Bobby Fischer, spoke about you have often been quoted.

‘Maybe these words were apocryphal, I know nothing about all this. In any case I would not care a bit if Fischer had said something or someone else had; that is not important.’

At that time I had no idea what my chess plans were. It was not my intention to spend my entire life on chess. I wanted to go to university, and that’s what I did. In fact it was a bit of a disappointment to have this big success in Palma de Mallorca so soon. I had intended to continue playing chess and some time later I might become a grandmaster. Now this aim had suddenly been achieved.’

'I enjoy it and of course it has filled my life, but I think that I can easily quit playing chess'

You didn't consider becoming a professional chess player?

'No, not at all. Professional or not, I wasn't thinking in these terms. I wanted to do something that mattered to me. Chess has never been so important. I enjoy it and of course it has filled my life, but I think that I can easily quit playing chess. I don't think I am emotionally attached to this activity.'

'The press can do whatever they please and I have no rights. Under these circumstances the entire phenomenon makes no sense to me'

It is tempting to draw parallels between Fischer and you, your press shyness, your sensitivity concerning playing conditions. Did you ever feel such affinity with him?

'No. As for his press shyness there are similarities, but there is also a big difference. I have the impression that Fischer wants to determine the rules of behaviour of the press towards the players and vice versa fully on his own. Furthermore, he may be shy, but we have also seen clear evidence that he can be very emotional. If I was informed correctly he expressed himself highly emotionally on television during his second match against Spassky, in a manner that I would prefer to avoid.'

My ideas about a fruitful collaboration between press and individual are: there ought to be a number of set rules of behaviour that both parties have to abide by. As the rules are now, the press as a group has complete command. They can do whatever they please and I have no rights. Under these circumstances the entire phenomenon makes no sense to me. There are individual exceptions, but statistically, if I look at the results, my encounters with the press have been unsatisfactory. So I decided to play this game no longer. I object to people being manipulated without their knowing where they are led. That invites power games.'

What rules would you suggest?

'I have mentioned them already. They should be aimed at spreading knowledge and not at arousing emotions. The purpose should be to teach people something and not only to amuse them. I am not a professional entertainer and if I entertain I want to do so in the way I choose.'

Of course, I might say something about emotions. That is not emotional in itself. In fact, I am doing so right now.'

Your next chess activities that made the international press took place in Seville in 1971, where you abandoned your Candidates' match against Petrosian while trailing 4-3 because of the noise in the playing hall. A tough lesson?

'Perhaps in a sense it was a lesson. I went there and wanted to play chess. Didn't we all want that? Chess, that was what it was all about and if there is something that disturbs the chess we will try to eliminate this disturbance. Right? But there it became clear to me that this was not the case at all, that the goals of many people were quite different. So I left. I thought, this is a different world, I have nothing to do with this. Perhaps that was a bit weak, but I was young and had no support. I didn't see any other solution.'

Did you blame Petrosian for this untimely end to the match?

'Yes, I did. In his publications afterwards he also lied about what had happened, although I have to say that he only exploited the occasion. He hadn't planned anything in advance, but it was bad sportmanship. Someone like Tal would never have done this.'

He could turn off his hearing-aid.

'Let's say he had an advantage.'

Did this experience seriously affect your career?

‘No. It is true that I didn’t play chess for a year, but that was because of my studies. I didn’t have any fixed plans. And I continued to play chess afterwards. At that time I didn’t have the idea that I was such a good or important player.’

Did you ever have that feeling? Let’s say when you were third in the world rankings?

‘No, that was a bit coincidental too.’

Yet you must have felt at home in the world top? I assume that you were not thinking, what am I doing here?

‘Oh well, felt at home... Of course I was not really a weaker player than the others, with the exception of Karpov. Yet I never felt a strong emotional attachment to this situation. I was always a bit odd in these matters.’

Yet, you could be thoroughly affected by a loss.

‘Yes, but that is because this showed my stupidity so clearly. That has little to do with my opponent, or with the result.’

‘If I play badly I have the feeling that I have no right to exist, that everybody should despise me, because I am such a bungler’

A lost game can stir up a good deal of self-hatred.

‘If I play badly I have the feeling that I have no right to exist, that everybody should despise me, because I am such a bungler. Of course that is a largely exaggerated feeling. Intellectually I can see that, but emotionally I cannot really stop this. It’s better now, mainly because I have grown used to it.’

He laughs long and hard when I suggest ‘Robert Hübner, finally used to his own stupidity’ as the inevitable title for this interview.

At the beginning of the third session I put three books between us on the table. The first book is called *Fünfundfünfzig feiste Fehler, begangen und besprochen von Robert Hübner*, or 55 Egregious Errors, committed and discussed by Robert Hübner. The second book is a collection of satirical pieces by the Finnish writer Olli that Hübner translated from Finnish into German. Finally there is his most recent book *25 Annotated Games*, a hefty tome of 400 pages in which he has subjected twenty-five of his games to his legendary scrutiny.

How much satisfaction do you derive from the fact that these books exist?

‘I am glad they are finished. I see the work I have spent on them. When I was employed at the university I wouldn’t get anything tangible until after one or two years of work: a booklet in which you had invested an endless amount of time, time during which you experienced little else.’

Do you scrutinize these books as hyper-critically as you analyze a chess game?

‘No, I don’t. Of course they also contain many mistakes, but one way or another they don’t leap out so much. Obviously these two chess books are full of errors, but for me they are not easy to find. That would take quite some work. For this book (*Feiste Fehler*) I have prepared an English edition. For that purpose I have looked at the analysis again and naturally I made quite a few changes. But I didn’t mind too much; mistakes in analysis are unavoidable. I can live with that. By definition you cannot change a chess game once it’s over. But you can always polish an analysis.

This is one of the reasons, of course, why I like these long analyses: it’s an attempt to improve the game in hindsight, to take this imperfect piece of work a bit closer to perfection.’

‘Understanding chess positions is difficult work’

You gladly mention your stupidity. Many people will disagree with you there. Calling a book 55 Egregious Errors sounds a bit like a pose. Posing like the big dumbo who is only capable of stupidities.

‘(Wholeheartedly) Yes, that’s also part of it. But there are other purposes too. One of them is to point out that understanding chess positions is difficult work. You have to make a real effort to find out the truth. In chess journalism there are too many people who write things like ‘now the bishop has a nice view along the long diagonal’, or ‘Excellent seen by the white player’. They create the impression that mastering chess is not much of a difficulty and that everyone who learns some tricks can make a good player.’

As long as he keeps his bishop on this long diagonal.

‘Right, exactly. I want to demonstrate that it is necessary, and perhaps also worth your while, to put in some effort. It doesn’t come all by itself.’

Do you think this hint is understood?

‘I don’t know. I don’t care either.’

Let’s take the next book. Twenty-five annotated games spread over four hundred pages. Some people will say, perhaps a bit much.

‘What do you mean, much? I find it a bit meagre. Chess is complicated and I find that you need a lot of material to understand the structure of a game. In any case that goes for me. Perhaps someone like Kasparov will say that this or that is perfectly clear to him and needs no further investigation. Quite often my first tries are in the wrong direction. These annotations are my attempts to understand a game.

I think that a weaker player may need even more information. That information I cannot give.

Of course every game includes a lot that I fail to notice. But I think that these elaborate comments create a structure which touches on a lot of motives pertinent to each position. So, if you make a mistake in a variation somewhere, you may have to adjust your assessment a bit, but you still have a direction in which you can continue your investigations. If there is only one line and there is a mistake in that line you are left with nothing. A tree of variations always leaves you with a structure you can fall back upon.’

‘You cannot read this book, on which I have worked for four thousand hours, in five minutes’

Wouldn’t it be friendlier towards the reader to make a selection from all these variations? To give those variations that ultimately matter? Now they have to live through your entire investigation.

‘If they don’t do that there is no use. You cannot read this book, on which I have worked for four thousand hours, in five minutes, that much is clear. Indeed, you have to have the wish to delve into the structure of the game. The reader has to be co-operative. I think that a rather weak player can learn a lot from this analysis too. But he’ll have to work as I had to work.’

The gap between you and society should not be closed by your adjustment to their wishes, but by them making better use of what you have to offer them.

‘Yes, certainly. I don’t like to adjust. There are adjusted people enough. Many people can write a book that can easily be consumed by everybody. They don’t need me for that; we have more than enough of those books. But there may not be many of this kind of book; therefore I find it more valuable. The notions quantity and quality too often overlap in our society. In fact, quantity is almost always seen as quality. That is a warped democratic idea.’

Finally these Fünfunddreissig Satirchen by the Finnish writer Olli, a pen name for Väinö Nuorteva who lived from 1889 to 1967. Did the publication of this German translation give you the feeling that you had proven again that you had more strings to your bow?

‘Perhaps. With great pleasure and considerable effort I have studied the Finnish language. And even though my command of the language is open to much improvement I must say that it occupies an important place in my life. Here, too, I wanted to demonstrate that I could reach a point where my efforts resulted in something tangible, which, I hope, is not too bad. People tend to overestimate the products of their pastimes. For instance, Lasker grossly overrated his philosophical works. To my mind they are quite worthless.’

If Finnish is somebody's favourite pastime, this may say something about his nature and character.

'Of course it wasn't by sheer accident that I was attracted by the Finnish language. I also like to go to Finland a lot. It's a small and individual country. I find it very relaxing. Generally speaking the people are very honest and direct, so that I get along well with them. At the same time it is a limited, surveyable culture, clearly separated from the rest of Europe.'

That's what you have always been looking for, these secluded worlds?

'Well, I don't like chaos in my thinking, that much is clear. If I can avoid it, I gladly will. Unfortunately I cannot always achieve this.

Particularly when I play chess.' ■