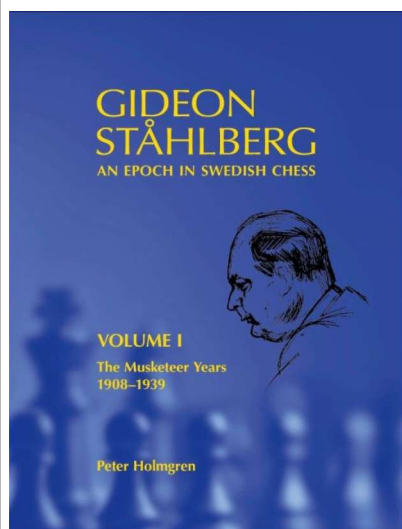


# GIDEON STÅHLBERG: An Epoch in Swedish Chess

## Volume 1 The Musketeer Years 1908-1939

By Peter Holmgren

Reviewed by Mark Capron



Verendel Publishing has done it again with another fantastic book. This time they chronicle Swedish Chess from the years 1908—1939 with emphasis (biography) on the first Swedish Grandmaster, Gideon Ståhlberg.

My first impression when I opened the package was wow! What a big book! It contains 582 pages. The size is a bit larger than A4 paper for comparison. It weighs in at almost five lbs.

According to some of the historical rating websites Ståhlberg would have been ranked around the 10th or 11th best player in the world at his peak.

Ståhlberg played all over Europe and into Asia and finally across the ocean to South America during the years of the book, 1908-1939. The rest of his life will be covered in a forthcoming volume.

Sweden had a few epochs of chess. One was during Gideon Ståhlberg's time. One was later with Ulf Andersson, and one was prior to the 20th century with the "dark ages" where chess was only played in clubs and bars.

The Musketeer Years is a reference to several Swedish masters that all came to be world class players. As stated in the introduction "Had all of them performed at their highest level at the same time, the national team could very well have been the strongest in the world." The main Musketeers were Erik Lundin, Gösta Stoltz, and Ståhlberg.

The book tells us that Gideon was born on January 26, 1908 in Angered, Sweden to Alfred and Augusta (Johansson) Ståhlberg. Gideon was the third child of four (sister Anita, brothers White and Anton). Gideon's brother White showed him how to play chess at age 11. Gideon's first love though was throwing the javelin, but he ended up damaging his elbow. He then opted for Chess during the long healing process. Gideon was still active in sports throughout his life playing tennis, swimming, and competing at table tennis.

Although I was only cursorily familiar with Ståhlberg before reading the book it is a potpourri of famous chess players who came into Ståhlberg's life. Some names you'll encounter Milner-Barry, Lasker, Capablanca, Keres, Spielman, Alekhine, Marshall, Flohr, Koltanowski, Menchik, Botvinnik, Tartakower, Euwe, Grob, Bogoljubow, Maroczy, Petrovs, Najdorf, Fine, and many more.

At a simul in Lorensberg on December 21, 1924 Ståhlberg played Rudolf Spielmann. "It was both a strange and wonderful feeling to meet a grandmaster for the first time. Spielman, the last romantic, played White in all the games, preferably using gambits. In my ignorance, I deviated from the theoretical lines and was subject to a violent attack that put me in danger of losing. In despair I set a rather simple trap that Spielman didn't discover. He made a natural move and was outright mated." p11.

Ståhlberg's first real tournament outside of club events was the 9th Swedish Congress in Trollhättan 1925. He shared second place with 6.5 out of 9 in the category II tournament.

A note on the format of the crosstables. They are not set up with the winner at the top and in final ranking order. They are left in the order of the draw. This is fine, but did take a minute to get used to. Personal preference would be to have put them in final ranking order.

In the 10th Swedish Congress held in Karlstad, Ståhlberg wanted to enter the Category I section, but hadn't qualified. He had to wait and see if a cancellation came. When the cancellation came he made the most of it by tying for first with Erik Bernflyckt. They had a playoff game, but it ended in a draw. About a month later they played another game to break the tie. Ståhlberg ended up winning the affair, and with it, the master title. He became Sweden's twentieth master.

A very nice feature of the book is that there are insets throughout highlighting various people in Ståhlberg's life. They are set apart by being in blue. The author mentioned that this feature set the publication time back more than a year. I think they were well worth it!

The book advertises it includes all known games of Ståhlberg. Several games in the book have the final result and some wording surrounding the game, but no actual moves are provided. It is assumed that the actual score to these games could not be unearthed.

In April 1930 Ståhlberg played Efim Bogoljubow in a four game match. Ståhlberg started badly by getting beat in the first two games handily. The third game was better, but he still lost. By the fourth game he had Bogol fighting for the draw though.

On October 4, 1930 Ståhlberg made his first real chess journalism contribution in *Ny Tid*. In the piece he wrote, about the Swedish chess press, he was quite outspoken and drew the ire of several in the form of rebuttal articles published in *Tidskrift för Schack*. Ironically in 1931 he became the games editor for *Tidskrift för Schack*.

The book has some humor here and there. An example was a comment by Stoltz published in *Kuriren*: "A nice week in Uddevalla. It was lucky that the heat came only the last day. Now I'm only

waiting for Prague, to see fat Berndtsson sweat.” p126.

In January 1932 Ståhlberg became the editor-in-chief of *Tidskrift för Schack*, thus allowing him to move to Stockholm. In March, he also became the chess editor of *Hvar 8 Dag* providing another source of income.

In January 1933 Ståhlberg played another match versus Spielmann. This was considered Ståhlberg's first important international individual success. He won 5-3 exacting revenge from his previous defeat.

In February of 1934 an eight game match with Nimzowitch was played. Ståhlberg won 5-3. “Thus, the match was decided, as I led 4.5—2.5 when the final game began. Nimzowitsch took his defeat like a man, congratulated me, and very politely said he hoped I didn't mind him trying to reduce my lead by playing for a win. I responded almost as politely, that of course it was his right. As black, in the euphoria of victory, I moved quickly and efficiently causing Nimzowitsch to end up with a disadvantage despite his significant efforts. After about twenty moves, he was also in time trouble, with only about fifteen minutes left. At this point Erik Olsson announced by phone that players and officials were invited to a closing party at the well-known Valand restaurant in Gothenburg, starting immediately after the game. Suddenly, Nimzowitsch made a surprising and original draw offer. ‘I'm worse,’ said the honest and sincere grandmaster, ‘and perhaps it's not correct to offer a draw, but I wanted to know if you're playing for a win.’ I have never liked beating an already beaten opponent, and I immediately accepted the draw offer, but I understand that at least one intended spectator took offense. He was buying an entrance ticket at that very moment!” p213.

Ståhlberg was awarded the grandmaster title for winning the Bad Niendorf tournament in 1934. Ståhlberg went undefeated in the tournament and won by half a point over Kurt Richter. Ståhlberg was now Sweden's first grandmaster!

Simul tours were very common back then. A pity they aren't as popular these days. Ståhlberg embarked on a mammoth simul tour covering 24 locations in Sweden. November 10, 1935 he started in the far southern town of Lund and then up to the northern town of Kalix and many stops at the towns in between. He ended on December 11, 1935 in Luleå hosted by Skurholmens SK. He scored 446 wins, 83 loses and 153 draws. A total of 682 games in the tour! Ståhlberg completed many such simul tours around various European countries, though, usually not quite as long!

In many places the author includes reprints of Ståhlberg's writings. These are written in a light blue font to call attention to them. Ståhlberg could be hard on his subjects, but in many cases they were hard right back at him. Sometimes the war of words reminds one of the Steinitz—Zukertort feuds.

Another funny story from the Sixth Olympiad was as follows: “On the first night, Alekhine entered accompanied by a Siamese cat, Chess, a fine beast. I hear I am to play against Mickey Mouse [*Mikénas (auth.)*], he said, so I have brought somebody who can deal with him.” p309. “Every day, Alekhine's wife could be seen among the audience carrying her husband's cat. It was tied with a long lace and often free to run around risking its life in the crowd. The cat's meow was the only sound tolerated in the play-

ing hall. When Sweden faced France the cat happened to be lost. This made the Alekhine couple very upset and with the Swedes suspected of kidnapping, it was generally believed that Alekhine wouldn't play. In the end he did, the cat was found, Sweden won 3.5—1.5 and everybody was happy.” p315.

In the 1936 Olympiad Ståhlberg suffered from an infection in his jaw which occasionally gave him a sleepless night. After one of these sleepless nights he requested to take the round off. This was denied by the team captain Lundin on the basis that he would be playing the old and peaceful Maróczy and as a bonus Lundin offered to provide a cognac if the pain got worse. After the cognac was provided Ståhlberg was falling asleep at the board and was startled by Maróczy giving him a gentle nudge, saying: “Ich biete Remis an!” (*I offer a draw!-ed.*) p387.



Ståhlberg published his first book in May of 1937. *Schack och schackmästare*. The second edition was reprinted in English by Harry Golombek in 1955 and titled *Chess and Chessmasters* by G. Bell and Sons.

Ståhlberg's 1938 match vs Paul Keres ended at 4-4. This was probably his best result prior to the war.

In an interview by Bjørn Nielsen on how difficult it was to meet Alekhine Ståhlberg commented: “Alekhine is indeed very difficult to meet—not just because of his playing strength and the complications he creates, but because he is very nervous and constantly moving. He rises, he sits, he rises, stands behind his chair, behind the opponent's, takes a couple of steps away, returns etc. It is annoying and consumes time, even if one does what one can to stay focused. ... Ståhlberg smiles at the thought of a 'lion in a cage'.” p495.

In 1939 Ståhlberg traveled to Buenos Aires for the Eighth Olympiad. He travelled on the ship *S/S Piriápolis*. Less than a year later this ship was bombed by a German aircraft during the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk.

The book ended after the Olympiad with Ståhlberg still in Buenos Aires. He asked to have some money wired and informed back home that he would be staying a few more weeks to play in another tournament.

Ståhlberg was not only a chessplayer, but he excelled at Bridge as well. He played almost anytime he could. “To further note how famous Ståhlberg had become in bridge circles, a note in *Dagens Nyheter* summarizing all sorts of records during the year is worth mentioning. It describes the most exciting bridge hand that curiously enough happened to be played by two chess masters, Stoltz and Ståhlberg. When sorting his cards, Stoltz could count ace, king queen, knight, ten, nine, eight and two of hearts together with the ace of clubs in his hand while Ståhlberg held the other two aces. The article does not mention what bid was played but that the two of hearts became decisive. A slam in hearts must be a good guess.” p257.

“Around 300 bridge players, each paying SEK5, sat down around Sweden on April 27 (1939 –ed) to play the deals prepared by Culbertson for the 7th World Bridge Olympic.” “...Ståhlberg was

the only Swede as South to solve all deals flawlessly. For this he received an honorary citation. Especially one deal, the eleventh, could only be solved by him and Gösta Kinnander out of 150 pairs. Ståhlberg was very proud of this and when he, by coincidence, met Putte Kock one day in the summer of 1958, he recalled the deal that made Kock include it in a book. Unfortunately, Ståhlberg's partner had a bad day which is why they missed out on the North/South victory, which instead went to Nils and Gösta Kinnander. pp509-510.

Ståhlberg and Alekhine played bridge between rounds at many tournaments using various partners each.

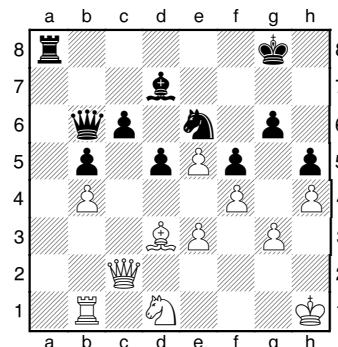
The text has many footnotes throughout. This reader would have preferred those notes to be right on same page or at least at the end of each chapter, but they were at the end of the book as a separate appendix.

The book features many games both annotated and not. An example of the annotation can be found in the following game:

**Ståhlberg, Gideon—Bogoljubow, Efim [D36]** Match/Nation GER-SWE 15–17 (4Players4R) Sopot (6), 12.09.1935  
[Notes by Gideon Ståhlberg]

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Nf3 e6 5.Bg5 Nbd7** The later very popular continuation 5...dxc4 was at this time considered incorrect. With the text move Bogoljubow aims at the Cambridge Springs Variation (6.e3 Qa5). (GS) In the Zurich tournament 1934 I tried 5. ... dxc4 against Flohr, but after the lively skirmish 6.e4! b5 7.e5 h6 8.Bh4 g5 9.Nxg5! Nd5! 10.Nf3 Qa5 11.Qd2 b4 12.Nxd5 cxd5 13.Be2 c3 14.bxc3 bxc3 15.Qc2 Bd7 16.a4 Nc6 17.0–0 Rc8 18.Rfc1 White's advantage was apparent. (TfS) **6.cxd5** This move has become popular over the last decade, but in the 1930s it was little used. (GS) I considered it tactically preferable to avoid the Cambridge Springs Variation, of which Bogoljubow is one of the leading connoisseurs. (TfS) **6...exd5 7.e3 Be7 8.Qc2 Nf8** A maneuver introduced by Sämisch, which I have later tried with success myself. (GS) Bogoljubow chooses a somewhat time-consuming method of development, which he has employed successfully before. (TfS) **9.Bd3 Ne6 10.Bh4 a6** This move is not necessary. (GS) **11.0–0 g6 12.Ne5 Nd7 13.Bxe7 Qxe7 14.f4 f5** The white position now undeniably appears superior, with the outpost on e5 and lead in development. But how to exploit these advantages? Black has a solid position without weak points. The strategy White chooses in the following turns out to be faulty. The best may be to give up the lead in development by exchanging on d7 and directing the other knight to e5 by way of b1, d2, and f3. **15.Rab1 0–0 16.b4 Nxe5!** The beginning of a powerful counter offensive on the queen's side. (GS) With some powerful moves, Black forestalls White's offense and instead seizes the initiative for himself. (TfS) **17.dxe5 a5 18.a3 axb4 19.axb4 b5!** Very well played! Black leads the queen to a7 and then has the better play, thanks to the control of the a-file and the pressure against e3. (GS) Bogoljubow has maneuvered excellently and set me a hard task. My position is indeed unenviable, with the "cheerless" pawn on e3, the threatening breakthrough d5–d4, and the important a-file in enemy hands! (TfS) **20.Qb3 Qa7 21.Nd1 Bd7 22.Rf2 Qb6 23.g3 Nc7 24.Kh1 Ra6 25.Ra2** Otherwise the doubled black rooks on the a-file will become unpleasant for White. (GS) I have barely consolidated the position and prevented the threatening doubling of rooks, but still the black play is preferable. (TfS) **25...Rxa2 26.Qxa2 Ra8**

**27.Qc2 Ne6 28.h4!** Now the time has come to resort to tactical means. With the text move I want to lure Bogoljubow into an unnecessary and dangerous "cautionary measure." (TfS) **28...h5?**



Bogoljubow has laid out the game in his best style, but the pawn move alarmingly weakens the position of the black king. (GS) Bogoljubow has consumed the greater part of his time for consideration and therefore decides to preclude the threat h4–h5 once and for all. (TfS) **29.g4!** An unpleasant surprise for Bogoljubow! (GS) **29...hxg4 30.h5** This was exactly what Bogoljubow wanted to prevent! The struggle now becomes extremely exciting. (TfS) **30...Qd8** After long consideration. For the following fifteen moves Bogoljubow had only a few minutes. (TfS) **31.Kg2! Ng7** With the fine tactical point 31...Qh4 32.Nf2! Qxh5? 33.Rh1! (GS, TfS) **32.hxg6 Qe8 33.Nc3 Qxg6 34.Ne2 Qf7 35.Nd4** Now White's positional advantage compensates for the sacrificed pawn. (GS) **35...Qf8 36.e6!** The best attacking continuation! (GS) The attack must be conducted energetically, so that Black gets no room to breathe. (TfS) **36...Bxe6 37.Nxe6 Nxe6 38.Bxf5 Qf6 39.Rh1 Ra7!** And the best defense! (GS) Despite his heavy time trouble Bogoljubow defends himself excellently. (TfS) **40.Kg3(?)** A trap, which the time-troubled Bogoljubow falls into. Objectively 40.Rh5! was stronger (40. ... Ng7 41.Rg5). (GS) **40...Ng7 41.Bxg4 Ra3 42.Qh7+ Kf7 43.Kf3!** A trap. By the way there is no better move. (TfS) **43...d4?** The decisive mistake! (GS) Bogoljubow had no time to find the drawing move 43. ... Qc3! The continuation might have been 44.Re1! (what else?) Qxe1 45.Bh5+ and the black king cannot escape the drawing checks. On the text move I had my winning line ready. (TfS) **44.Rh6 Rxe3+ 45.Kg2 Qxf4 46.Bh5+ Resigns.** A varied struggle and for me a welcome revenge for the needless defeat against Bogoljubow in Stockholm 1930. (GS) An interesting struggle, which in a splendid way shows the strategical and tactical elements of chess. (TfS) **1–0** pp322-3. (The GS are the notes from Ståhlberg's book *I kamp med världseliten* and TfS are his notes from *Tidskrift för schack—ed.*)

The book was a joy to read not only due to the extensive content, but due to the high production quality that Verendel Publishing is becoming known for: hardback availability, excellent paper quality, strong binding, clear printing, and excellent cover designs. The games and annotations were enjoyable. I liked the fact that contemporary annotations were used as it gives a better understanding of the times. Some of the bridge stories were highlights to this reviewer. It was fun to hear how this chess player or that chess player were good or not so good at bridge and why. The amount of history found in the book was exceptional. There were a few times it did feel as though it was fact after fact after fact. All the miscellaneous stories and anecdotes helped offset potential

pitfall. A few language translation errors could be found, but nothing that detracted from the story. The plethora of famous players who played against Ståhlberg was amazing showing that chess was certainly alive and well during the early 1900's. Peter Holmgren did an fantastic job researching and writing this book over the past decade and it shows. The historical detail, games, stories, anecdotes, etc. make this book highly recommendable. I would give it 4.5 out of 5.0 stars.

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**About the author**

Peter Doggers is one of the most well-known and respected journalists in the chess world. An internationally ranked chess player, he is the director of news and events at the market leader in online chess, Chess.com. Doggers has played chess for more than thirty-five years and has covered it for nearly twenty. He has interviewed dozens of grandmasters, played basketball with Magnus Carlsen and interviewed Garry Kasparov at Bobby Fischer's grave. Doggers lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

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