

# The Unobstructed View

by Karl, Harry Schaak

David DeLucia possibly owns the most beautiful chess-collection in the whole world. Until now only a few have been granted access to this collection of exquisite valuables with their own eyes. Yet during the World Championship in New York the multi-millionaire from Connecticut allowed KARL a tour through his very personal realm, one in which the past comes back to life.

In the past 200 years, there have been chess-collections that were far greater than David DeLucia's collection. When one would consider just books, the collections of John Griswold White, J. W. Rimington-Wilson, Meindert Niemeijer and Lothar Schmid were more comprehensive. If on the other hand one would consider the quality instead of the quantity of the single objects, the distance with DeLucia's collection becomes considerably smaller. But what really distinguishes the collection of the American and in that regard, surpasses all the other collections, are the manuscripts, the autographs, the memorabilia and the, as DeLucia characterizes them, "ephemera" like letters, game scores, postcards and the like.

The most valuable items are gathered on the first floor, which one can access over a small wooden staircase. So far not more than a dozen people (with the exception of DeLucia's family) have set eyes on this extraordinary collection. Every visitor immediately notices, through the diligence with which everything is displayed, as if in a museum, that DeLucia loves what he has.

From the previously two roomed space, DeLucia had a wall removed. Now there is an L-shaped hall, which has a surface of around 90 m<sup>2</sup>. An air-conditioning unit regulates the temperature and humidity, an ingenious lighting concept provides a warm atmosphere. In the front part (of the hall) are multiple tables with chess sets, some of which used to belong to Bobby Fischer. The walls are composed of dark wood, in which shelves and cabinets are built-in. In showcases, items are arranged in a special way. Each specific composition tells a small story, establishes an interconnection, a link, which is maybe not always immediately deduced by the unfamiliar observer, but is obvious to the owner. Some items have small notes with explanations and comments attached to them, and many books are covered in mylar. In between the chess objects are private items: the shoes of DeLucia's daughter when she was young, a Chucky doll of his sister and the fishing knife of his father. This place is a very private area, a retreat, a place for contemplation.

*Just like DeLucia connects memories to the items of his closest relatives, he similarly handles his collection.*

The joy he experiences doesn't so much depend on his collection itself, but on specific items, items that are associated with certain memories. The emotions that are evoked by these items are the actual drive behind his collecting (Sammellertätigkeit). "I have some very expensive books, that barely mean a thing to me", he points out, "because they don't have a history to tell and they don't trigger any emotions in me." DeLucia is especially attracted by those things in which one can find traces of vividness (in German "Lebendigkeit"). When he is sitting in his library, his relatives come to life in his imagination, as well as the greats of the chess world. In the end his collection is the sum of all those memories that manifest themselves in these particular objects. And somehow Citizen Kane's last words come to mind: Rosebud...

## Beginnings and noteworthy situations

DeLucia came from a home where money was almost never at hand. Between the items of his collection, there is a one dollar note that he once got from his father, when he was still a child. On it is written: "May you never be broke". Maybe that is why DeLucia was so successful on Wall Street, where he earned a fortune at Goldman Sachs. He has retired since 2000 and now lives in the small village of Darien in Connecticut, an area where the richest citizens of the country are living and where there is a private security service, which is

paid for by the residents themselves. His home, which was built by an heiress of the jewelry family Van Cleef & Arpels – a modern mansion – is situated on a vast estate.

The 63-year old started collecting when he was working 80-90 hours a week for the investment bank Salomon Brothers in London. A colleague, who was an art-collector, advised him to start collecting something as well. And as his only interest was chess, the choice was not hard to make. He obtained his first set of books at an auction in 1985. But he only established himself as a “true” collector a few years later when he started working for Goldman Sachs and moved back to the U.S. At the New York antiquarian book fair of 1988, he found “a wonderful copy” of Ruy Lopez’s 1561 book and this further spurred his interest in old books.

Because he had bought this prized book, a dealer drew his attention to a special collection on the West Coast. Reginald Hennessey had died in 1982 and had left his comprehensive collection of 3,000 books to his wife, including a Ruy Lopez first edition and some Damianos from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Renowned collectors like Lothar Schmid were interested as well. However, after a meticulous inspection, DeLucia acquired the entire collection for 85,000 dollars. Mrs. Hennessey sent the volumes, meticulously packed, at no charge to New York. For weeks, his apartment was packed with boxes. Every evening he opened another box, it was like Christmas. To this day, these books are the core of DeLucia’s collection.

The catalogue of this collection in which he wrote down many comments and which was the foundation of his research and comparisons he still possesses till this day. It is probably only worth 10 cents but DeLucia wouldn’t even sell it for 1,000 dollars. To him this modest thin little booklet is one of the most prized items in his entire collection.

With the acquisition of the Hennessey Collection he made the leap into becoming a “reputable” collector. At this point others became aware of him. Suddenly, he started to get many offers from dealers and other collectors. But the “colleagues” were not very fond of him back then, “because I bought in a very aggressive way which I don’t do anymore in the same fashion.”

Nevertheless, the path of a collector is full with obstacles and DeLucia as well had to deal with some. (*literally translated: “Nevertheless the path of a collector is rocky and DeLucia too had to pay his apprentice’s dues.”*) The biggest mistake he made was right after the Sotheby’s auction of 1990, when the Bradley Martin library, one of the most valuable private collections, was auctioned off. In this collection, there was one of the rarest chess books in the world: Arthur Saul, *The famous game of chesse-play*, London 1614, first edition. It’s the first original chess book written by an Englishman and today there are only six known copies. DeLucia paid 22,000 dollars for this book, that Bradley Martin housed in a fireproof asbestos leather covered clamshell box, as it is so valuable. “An outstanding price (*hammer price*), but I knew it was a gem”, summarizes DeLucia without any regret. But the next day a dealer (whom DeLucia didn’t like and whom he didn’t trust) offered him a second edition of Saul - 1618. A book just as rare, but the price was too high in his opinion. He hasn’t seen a copy of it since. A colossal blunder, which he does not forgive himself until this day, because Saul is, in its different editions, probably the rarest chess books ever. When DeLucia absolutely wants something nowadays, he buys it and doesn’t let such opportunities slip anymore.

Another thing that DeLucia had to learn, was linked to the buying-up of larger collections. When he acquired the collection of John Rather, the editor of Chess Review, he dragged 120 big boxes into his house. In the end, he was completely spent, had bruises everywhere and could barely move in the following days. After this event, he never economized on the wrong things anymore, but instead always hired a young person to transport the boxes of books.

When DeLucia was still working at Goldman Sachs, every three months he would call 200 book dealers worldwide and would inquire about chess books. Despite the enormous effort, in a time where there wasn’t

any internet yet, good items were hard to come by. Yet, sometimes he was lucky. A dealer in Spain told him, that he only had a chess book for beginners, *Chess made easy*, which wasn't very interesting. Admittedly an all-purpose title, but DeLucia instantly started to listen attentively and tensed up. Was this possibly about the first chess book that was ever printed in the U.S. in 1802 in Philadelphia? Indeed, it was, and he acquired it for not even 100 dollars. This book is not only valuable to chess book collectors, but as well to collectors of early American literature, and therefore nowadays has a value of around 1500-2000 dollars. "Whenever I come across this book, I think of that phone call", says DeLucia.

DeLucia succeeded in managing an important acquisition in the nineties, when he bought scoresheets, letters and some books of the Capablanca-archive from the Manhattan Chess Club. At that time the president of the MCC, Jeff Kossack, wanted to sell it to him, so that the historically valuable material would remain in the U.S. DeLucia, who was a member of the club, did not only outbid the highest bid of 18,000 dollars made by Laszlo Polgar but even added a few thousand dollars more as the MCC was already in financial difficulties.

But on the other hand, when he later was offered the scoresheets of the big New York tournaments of 1924 and 1927, he made another grave mistake in his collecting career. Again, the price seemed too high to him and he declined. Someone else took a closer look at the material and figured out that there was much more in the collection than the game scores. This archive later became known as the Hanon Russell Collection.

DeLucia could only correct his blunder many years later, albeit that the acquisition now came at a much higher cost. He bought Russell's collection and gave half of it to the MCC. When the MCC later had to close its doors there wasn't anybody left to take care of this particular half. The last president of the MCC, Jeff Kossack, offered DeLucia, whom was fondly remembered due to his generous donation, the complete contents of the MCC for the price of the accrued renting costs which were only around 800 dollars. DeLucia, who didn't know beforehand what to find in the haul, was relieved to find the complete club legacy stowed away behind all the furniture as the truck was unloaded at his home. Among it was the original contract of the first world championship between Zukertort and Steinitz from 1886, which today is one of the most important items of his collection but as well there was the guestbook of the MCC with many signatures of top players plus the trophy which Man Ray had made from silver for the match between Samuel Reshevsky and Pal Benkö.

When DeLucia at a later date, was buying the possessions of Bobby Fischer in Budapest, Pal Benkö gave him a helping hand. The native-born Hungarian eventually asked him about the legacy of the MCC and the trophy. He reckoned that it actually belonged to him, because he was the one who had suggested the idea to Man Ray back then. "But you are forgetting one crucial fact", DeLucia replied with a smile, "you lost that match!"

## Highlights

DeLucia is particularly interested in memorabilia. He started collecting it when it had little appeal to others. Especially private possessions of world champions, who lived in the U.S., attract his attention. So, it is no surprise to find Morphy, Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, Aljechin and Fischer depicted on his Exlibris.

Furthermore, DeLucia owns approximately 4,000 to 5,000 books. In the past, there were a few thousand more, but he has reduced his portfolio considerably in the last years, perhaps as well due to the fact that he is planning (in the medium term) to move to Florida. Some empty spots in his showcases reveal that in this year alone he sold a large number of books. He is increasingly focusing on the important publications of which the majority is of first-class quality. The most valuable and rare of these are gathered in a display cabinet. The most expensive item is the Parisian Lucena Manuscript. DeLucia purchased it at an auction in 1989, when the great collection of André Muffang was for sale. Since Lothar Schmid wanted it as well, it came down to a bidding war. In the end, he acquired the Lucena for 110.000 DM (\$48,000). Next to the

Lucena stands a first edition Damiano, which costs between 35,000 and 45,000 dollars. It is accompanied by Vida, Ruy Lopez, Gianutio, Salvio, Porto, Saul, Selenus, Carrera, Salvio, Greco, Weickhmann, Hyde, Stamma, the first Philidor, Lolli – just to name a few.

In the non-stop wall display cabinets, DeLucia often showcases his books with other objects. One curiosity is standing next to the other: the volumes of *L'Italia Scacchistica*, which are very rare and of which he – as the only one in the world – possesses the complete issues since 1911. The St. Louis guestbook with signatures of Pillsbury and Lasker. Staunton's copy of Selenus as well as many historical chess clocks, some of which that were the first of their kind. The book *Opposition and sister squares* from Duchamp/Halberstadt together with multiple letters and signatures of the artists. A manuscript of Mieses which was never published. An early and original photograph of Steinitz. A cup (trophy) from the match between the U.S. and the USSR in 1954. The typewritten manuscript of Ruben Fine's *Basic Chess Endings*. Letters of Chigorin, Bernstein, Aljechin, Bogoljubow...

Several chess cabinets display items of Bobby Fisher, his bible and his copy of *Mein Kampf*, his wristwatch and his wallet, a children's book, an inscribed copy of his work "I was tortured in the Pasadena Jailhouse!", a 15 puzzle and five pocket chess sets. A downright odd combination. In another showcase are Fischer's copies of *My 60 Memorable Games* along with the manuscript that originally only contained 52 games. And a worn-down book about the World championship-match between Karpov and Korchnoi which Fischer clearly had held in his hands regularly. Along with it, over a hundred Fischer game scores among which was Bobby's original game score of the Game of the Century against Donald Byrne. In another corner stand many large-sized photos of the American world champion.

And then DeLucia opens two big cabinets packed with private items of Fischer which he acquired in Budapest. A great deal of which he already revealed in his books *Bobby Fischer Uncensored* and *Triumph and Despair*. But in this constellation, it feels like an unobstructed view behind the myth of the real Bobby Fischer. A portable radio, his accordion, a numbers puzzle, address books, three passports, his traveling bags, fan mail, a prototype of the first Fischer chess clock, his correspondence and notes and his chess library containing over 1,000 books.

Back when DeLucia spent a few days in Fischer's apartment in Budapest, organizing the transport, he read the book *Finding Bobby Fischer*, which had been the private property of the world champion and which had been written by Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam. This is how DeLucia got acquainted with the chief editor of *New In Chess*, with whom he is friends till this day.

I wonder how much material DeLucia owns of Paul Morphy. He comments he almost has everything that still exists of it (There are obviously Morphy items owned by others). Most of it comes from David Lawson, author of *The Pride and Sorrow of Chess*, the single most important Morphy biography. Among these things is one of the highlights of the collection: the chess board from the first great American chess hero, which Morphy got as a birthday present on his twelfth birthday. A whole shelf is loaded with his signed books, a sculpture of his hand done by Lequesne (only one in existence), his walking cane with the name Morphy engraved on the handle. Another highlight is an original photograph of Morphy, taken by the famous photographer and chronicler of the civil war Matthew Brady in 1859. Morphy has written an inscription underneath the photograph to W.J.A. Fuller, "As a souvenir and a small token of our friendship." Fuller was one of the contestants of the first American Chess Congress in 1857 in New York, of which DeLucia owns multiple score sheets with comments hand-written by Morphy.

In another corner is the trunk of Capablanca and within it his top hat. His game scores from New York 1924, including his famous defeat against Reti. At yet another spot lie his golden pocket watch and recordings of his visit at the NBC studios in 1942.

A cabinet is devoted to Lasker. Next to an oil painting and the personal books of the world champion, of which most are signed, are lots of boxes filled with postcards and manuscripts and also game scores. The 1,000+ Lasker letters are stored away in a multitude of albums. Back then, DeLucia paid 250 dollars per letter.

These letters sparked a dispute, when a group of researchers were preparing the comprehensive Lasker monograph, which was published in 2008. They would have liked to examine the relevant papers, but DeLucia declined access, something which they held against him. He thinks most of these letters wouldn't have been of great value to their research, as most are written to his wife and are about everyday life. In his forthcoming book about Lasker dozens of these letters will be printed.

"I am not a library", DeLucia points out. "I never hand out items of my collection outside the home, not even for exhibitions. Many items, which have a very personal value to me, are one of a kind, and cannot be replaced if lost or damaged. And after every loan they are worth a little less."

From this dispute, it becomes clear that a collection is always located on the charged relationship between the public and private sphere. On the one hand, it has a preserving function which can be useful for the reappraisal of the past but on the other hand it is as well an intimate realm with a distinct importance to the collector.

### **Personal publications**

Despite the fact that only a few have seen the collection in Connecticut with their own eyes it is still very well documented. DeLucia has made the many objects of his collection accessible to the public by high-quality publications, albeit these catalogues, which have become collectors' items in their own right, have only been produced for a small, financially powerful circle of connoisseurs. In 2005, *A few Old Friends* was published in an edition with 150 prints, in 2007 the second edition with 250 prints. And in 2012 *In Memoriam* was published as a double volume for an initial price of 1,150 dollars. The proceeds of these books DeLucia donated to medical research institutions. In the near future, another book with Lasker material will be published.

These works contain splendid photo material of rare antiquarian books. Yet many collector-colleagues felt snubbed because DeLucia had written down many details for every book including the prices. The expertise, the knowledge, what a book is worth, was a deciding advantage for a seasoned collector.

Nowadays DeLucia regrets the specification of the price. Not because he revealed "business secrets", but because prices can heavily fluctuate. The market for "high-end" books is very straightforward and prices are constantly changing. As soon as the market is saturated, the value of a book can drop rapidly. For example, very recently one paid 4,000 dollars for Thomas Hyde's *De ludis orientalibus* from 1694, but now one can find it for 1,500 dollars because, in the meantime, it has been added to every big collection. The same drastic price drop can also be observed for Selenus, the first German chess book from 1616, which is characterized by DeLucia as one of the most beautiful chess books of all time.

In his last planned book, in which he wants to reveal all his collecting knowledge, he wants to illustrate the relativity of these prices. A relevant factor in this is also the rarity and uniqueness of these items. Some books, like the Lucena, the first edition of Damiano or the Saul exist in very small quantities and are rare. However, many believe that the first edition of Ruy Lopez 1561 is rare, which DeLucia contradicts: "Lothar

Schmid owned four copies, and I as well had four copies, of which I have in the meantime sold three. In that case one cannot speak about unique anymore.”

Moreover “uniqueness” is nowadays not an adequate enough aspect for DeLucia when considering a purchase. A book has to have a historical value or significance as well, only then it becomes valuable to me. “This is the mantra I want to use to collect my books”, he says. “Because there are many chess publications that are rare, but nevertheless are lacking in content.”

## **Advice**

Every collector aims for originality. With the ephemera of great chess-personalities, DeLucia found a niche that today is the trademark of his collection. But over the course of many years and like every collector, he made many mistakes and nowadays would do some things differently: “If I were to do it all over again, I would still collect everything that I collect now, but I would focus on far fewer books. My biggest mistake was not exclusively focusing on the highlights. Today I also wonder why I have German, French or Italian books in my library which I can’t even read. Besides, one should not get bogged down in the many different varieties and different editions of these books.

Likewise, one should ask if one really wants to compete with the J. G. White Collection or the Niemeijer/van der Linde Collection? That is impossible! Nowadays, I do not collect to outdo others, but I collect because items appeal to me in a personal way. In the past that used to be different. I screened the catalogues and when a certain book was missing in the inventory of a larger library, then I absolutely wanted to have it. Lothar Schmid and I were at a certain point quite similar. The difference between a collector and a hoarder who accumulates things, is only a very fine line.”

Nowadays if one would offer DeLucia a Lasker or Capablanca letter which had little content, he wouldn’t buy it anymore, unlike in the past where he would have always seized the opportunity. Having said this, it is still important to him that he continuously improve his collection. When he finds an immaculate copy of a book, he replaces it and sells the other.

Anybody that wants to build a qualitatively valuable library is eventually forced to acquire complete collections. DeLucia acquired between 15 and 20 collections, the accurate number he cannot quite remember. He always enjoyed more to buy the things than to sell them. But today, he regrets that he did not offer his doubles more aggressively. “One has to watch out that not too many common items sneak into the collection”, DeLucia warns. “When at a certain moment one notices that far too many things in one’s collection don’t bring any satisfaction or happiness, then that is quite depressing.” Nowadays, DeLucia is convinced, that there are at best a hundred books that one really needs. “But one first has to find them”, he adds with a smile.

## **The Schmid Collection**

According to DeLucia, the Schmid Collection is unmatched in respect to the number of books since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. “Lothar Schmid definitely had a smashing time”, says DeLucia. “He travelled the world, maintained a lot of contacts, made bargains and discovered rarities. Among the hunters, he was by far the best.”

When Schmid died in May 2013, DeLucia contacted the family and negotiated a possible acquisition of the collection. In November 2014, he travelled to Bamberg for seven days, to inspect the collection. Yet, due to the fact that there was no catalogue for the roughly 50,000 books, DeLucia was only able to examine a small fraction of them. At the end, there was only disillusionment – for the Schmid family and for DeLucia. They could not agree on a price.

Even though DeLucia criticizes certain things about the Schmid library, there are many objects in the collection that he would like to have, especially the Lucena, the first printed chess book from 1497, of which there exist only 20 copies. This incunabulum is regarded as one of the most valuable chess books in the world.

“Nobody knows how much the Schmid Collection is worth”, says DeLucia. “That is the problem. It would take me months to find that out. And I have already invested an immense amount of time. One does not pay multiple millions of dollars without knowing what it contains – even if Schmid has collected a world class collection, one that will never again be obtained in this constellation.” DeLucia is that wealthy, that he could buy the collection for the price that the Schmid-family has set. But he values the things meticulously just like in his past profession in which he was so successful.

After the break-down of the negotiations, DeLucia closed the chapter in his own personal way, by publishing the book *Seven Days in Bamberg*, where he on the one hand, introduces the highlights of the Schmid Collection, but on the other hand, also ventilates his frustration. The Schmid family was not pleased about this, because on the one hand, they never gave a written permission to publish the photo material, and because on the other hand, the collection was appeared in an unfavorable manner. Today, DeLucia is of the opinion that he made a mistake back then: “One should never burn a bridge unnecessarily. And with *Seven Days in Bamberg* I unnecessarily did just that.”

## **Foundation**

Maybe because he sees the problems Lothar Schmid’s collection is causing, DeLucia wants to secure his collection in safe hands during his own lifetime. That is why he is considering donating 70 to 80% of his own collection. He would like to keep for himself just the objects that mean a lot to him,. This is why he recently started to look for institutions that could be interested in his collection. “In the old days that used to be easy”, he explains, “but nowadays institutions don’t have money, space or professional staff. It would certainly not be a problem to find an institution for the autographs, manuscripts and letters, as they don’t take up a lot of space. But the books are the killer”, he says, “since they come with storage costs.”

## **Conclusion**

DeLucia had to deal with a few strokes of fate in the last number of years. Except for his children, he has lost all of his family members. That changes the perspective. When he looks back on his life, he is happy: “I lived the American dream. At 18 I left home, didn’t have any money, but luck was on my side. If my life ended today, I would be grateful for all that I have, my friends, my family. Do I really need the Lucena? No. Would I like to have it? Of course! Nevertheless, I perceive my collection as coming to its’ end, rather than still being formed. I am still a collector, but nowadays I only hunt the elephants. Recently, I obtained two game scores of Paul Morphy from the first 1857 U.S. Chess Congress, signed by him with his hand-written notes. Those are the things I really value nowadays.”

## **Acknowledgements**

My acknowledgements go out to Andy Ansel and Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam; without them my visit to David DeLucia would probably not have been possible.