

Genna Sosonko

The Essential Sosonko

Collected Portraits and Tales
of a Bygone Chess Era

New In Chess 2023

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FOREWORD BY GARRY KASPAROV

Half a century of freedom

Over half a century ago, on August 18, 1972, Genna Sosonko left the USSR forever and two months later settled in the Netherlands. He was almost 30 years old. The subsequent sharp breakthrough of the former national master is impressive: Sosonko grew into a world-class grandmaster; a strong practitioner; and a prominent theorist – a creative chess player, looking for new paths and with independent ideas.

During those decades, he revealed his talent in the field of chess journalism and writing. This genre had attracted him for a long time. Genna, a man of broad humanist erudition and a sharp critical mind, had always been interested in the world of chess, its people and its past. When we met in the late eighties, we often talked about these topics, and many of Genna's thoughts that he expressed in our conversations then turned into beautiful essays. They were published in English in the books *Russian Silhouettes* and *The Reliable Past*, which I read and reread with great pleasure.

A large portion of his essays is devoted to the World Champions and their rivals. A former coach who helped Tal and Korchnoi back in 1968-1971, Sosonko knew the champions first-hand: he had met most of them more than once, and not only at the chess board. Whereas in the project *My Great Predecessors* I study the work of the luminaries of the game, tracing the development of chess thought through the prism of their successes and failures, Genna showed the champions in ordinary, everyday life, revealing their views and their unique individual character traits.

But Sosonko writes not only about champions. Dozens of his essays are devoted to less famous players. The reader is presented with a gallery of wonderful portraits, painted with a due measure of objectivity and detachment. 'Look,' he seems to say, 'this is the chess world, its heroes with all their advantages and disadvantages!' Subtly feeling the psychological background of events, he talks about the hidden springs of chess life, conveys to us the atmosphere of bygone times. The style of narration he created delivers real pleasure even to the most demanding reader.

With the beginning of Soviet dominance in chess, the game became politicized, and the opportunity to tell the whole truth about people, giving them comprehensive and objective characteristics, disappeared. And even today, when reading articles about chess, you often feel some kind of politicking, 'following the way the wind blows', not only from

Russian, but also from Western authors. Genna doesn't have any of that! He was able to become a truly free person, to rise above the conventions of the chess world.

This new, anniversary book by the outstanding writer includes his selected essays – both those already published by the New In Chess publishing house, and others that readers will see for the first time.

Such books are especially important today, when young chess players are often only familiar with the history of the game from computer databases. Alas, the computer boom and the dominance of the sporting factor distance the new generations from quite recent history, that living socio-cultural fabric of the past, from which chess of the 21st century is woven. That invaluable experience should not be forgotten.

I would like to wish the author as long a continuation as possible, doing the work that he does better than almost anyone else in the world. Each new story of his is the preservation of grains of our chess life. I hope that Genna will be able to save many more characters and destinies for the future. No matter how much chess changes, its history will always be of interest to people as part of human culture.

Garry Kasparov
New York, April 2023

MIKHAIL TAL (1936-1992)

My Misha

‘My head is filled with sunshine’ – these were the first words of the 23-year-old Misha Tal in an overcrowded hall in Moscow, immediately after his brilliant victory in the Candidates tournament in Yugoslavia in 1959. It was there, too, that he said: ‘In the first game of the match with Botvinnik I will play e2-e4 and beat him!’

In the mid-1950s a young man, practically a boy, with fiery black eyes and a manner of playing that surprised everyone, burst into the world of strictly positional chess. His manner of playing amazed some and shocked others. A Dutch newspaper made an observation that was typical of the general reaction of the entire chess world: ‘For a player of world class, Tal’s play is amazingly reckless, not to say foolhardy and irresponsible. For the moment he is successful, because even the most experienced and tested defenders are unable to withstand this terror on the chess board. He aims first and foremost for attack, and in his games one commonly sees sacrifices of one or even several pieces. Opinions are sharply divided about this foolhardy way of playing. Some see him as nothing more than a gambler, who has luck on his side, while others think that he is a genius who is opening up unknown fields in chess.’

Although he was already the challenger, Tal had met the World Champion only once, during the Olympiad in Munich in 1958, where they played together on the Soviet team. The story that the little Misha, with a chess board under his arm, was not admitted by Botvinnik, when the latter was spending a holiday by the seaside near Riga in 1948, is of course a fabrication by journalists. Strolling between the tables, while his opponent was considering his move, the World Champion asked the young Candidate: ‘Why did you sacrifice that pawn?’ And he received a ‘hooliganish’, as Misha himself expressed it, reply: ‘That pawn was simply in my way.’ He loved this word ‘hooligan’, and often, when analysing, if he suggested some unclear sacrifice, he would add: ‘Let’s have a bit of hooliganism.’

I got to know Misha in the Autumn of 1967. He had come from Riga to Leningrad for a few days, and in the small room of a mutual acquaintance we played an enormous number of blitz games, of which I managed to win one and draw a few. After a few more visits we became friends, and it did not come as a surprise when he invited me to Riga, to his city, to work

together. He was preparing for a match with Gligoric. Of course, for me this was a flattering invitation. During this and subsequent visits to Riga, I must have spent something like half a year with him.

I would arrive at about eleven at his big flat in the centre of Riga, and within half an hour we would be sitting at the chess board. Now, a quarter of a century later, I realize that variations were not especially necessary for him. The most important thing for him – and here I completely agree with Spassky – was to create a situation on the board, where his pieces came alive, and for him, as for no one else, they did indeed become alive. His credo was to create tension and to seize the initiative, to create a position such that the spiritual factor – that of giving mate – would prevail over and even laugh at material values.

We spent a mass of time on variations such as 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗f6 4.♙g5 c5, and the pawn sacrifice d4-d5 in the Queen's Indian Defence which he employed in a little-known training game with Kholmov. But we also looked at the Nimzo, and the Spanish, which turned out to be the main openings in his match with Gligoric.

Quite often Misha's permanent trainer Alexander Koblenz, 'Maestro' to his friends, would arrive. This is also what Misha invariably called him. Behind their distinctive jokingly-ironic manner of conversing lay a sincere attachment that went back many years. 'That's enough for today' Misha would say, 'Blitz, blitz.' Sacrificing pieces against each of us in turn, for the most part, incorrectly, he would repeat: 'Never mind, now I'll make his flag fall.' Or in very sharp situations, when he himself had only a few seconds left, his favourite: 'Calmness is my sweetheart.' I do not recall an occasion when he played blitz without any evident pleasure. Whether it was a game from the championships of Moscow or Leningrad, most of which were won by him, the blitz world championship in Saint John in 1988, or simply a five-minute game with an amateur who had cornered him in a hotel foyer.

The computer age was a long way off, Gligoric's games were scattered about in various bulletins, and in searching for them Misha would often get sidetracked in one of the magazines that had been sent to him from various countries of the world, and, glancing at a diagram, would suggest: 'How about, instead, looking at the games from the last championship of Columbia?'

'Perhaps you should take a break?' would suggest Misha's mother, Ida Grigorevna, a tall, imposing woman. She was the oldest sister of a bourgeois Jewish family from Riga, which fate had scattered throughout the world. Her sister Riva lived in The Hague from the late 30s, and Misha nearly always used to see her during his frequent visits to Holland. As a

young girl she had gone for six months to Paris, to improve her French, but fate had turned out differently. The first time that Aunt Riva saw her famous nephew was in 1959 in Zurich, when she learned about the coming chess tournament there. 'He was all full of energy, so bright,' she said, 'and that tall thin American, still just a boy, he used literally to hang on every word of Misha.'

She had another sister, Ganya – two years younger – who settled in Brooklyn, New York, and whom I remember well from when she was in Riga.

The surname of Misha's mother, who died in 1979, was Tal, like Misha's father: she married her cousin. In an enormous flat (by my concepts at the time) there lived: Misha's mother, Misha's elder brother Yasha, who outlived her only by a short time, Misha himself with his girlfriend, who emigrated in 1972 and who lives, as far as I know, in Germany, Misha's first wife, Sally, who left the country in 1980 and now lives in Antwerp, and their son Gera, a charming boy with fair curly hair, now the father of three children and a dentist in Beer-Sheva, in Israel. In 1980, in my house in Amsterdam, Misha several times met his son. The times then were not so liberal, and an open meeting between a father and an émigré son, even in the presence only of fellow-grandmasters, could have had unpleasant consequences, such as being forbidden to travel abroad for two years or more (which Misha in fact had to experience in his time).

Nearly every evening they were visited by Uncle Robert, as everyone called him, a friend of Misha's father who was a doctor. He was a wonderful man, according to all who knew him. He died in 1957. Uncle Robert, a taxi-driver in Paris in the 20s, who had lost all his family during the war, himself rather a weak player, could watch for hours our analysis and blitz games, looking at Misha with loving eyes. Sometimes he would reprimand Misha for something, Misha would defend himself weakly, and Ida Grigorevna, who always took the side of Uncle Robert, would say: 'Misha, don't be rude, please; don't forget that he is after all your father.' It was a well-kept family secret that his Uncle Robert was his biological father. Now, a quarter of a century later, with all of them gone, I can picture very well Uncle Robert with his invariable cigarette in his nicotine-stained fingers, often with a glass of cognac, and Misha, especially in his later years, so similar to him in appearance, manner of speaking, and holding himself.

During these squabbles I used to avert my eyes in embarrassment, but no one paid any attention to me, since they accepted me as one of their own.

But then evening would arrive, and we would have to go somewhere to eat. A taxi was summoned, and we would drive to one of the restaurants,

where, of course, Misha was always recognized. When Tal became World Champion he was presented with a 'Volga' – effectively the top brand of Soviet car at that time. But he gave the car to his brother. He was totally indifferent to any form of technology, and it goes without saying that he never entertained any thoughts of learning to drive. Only in the last period of his life did he acquire an electric razor, and the marks of its actions could be seen here and there on his face. In my time the shaving procedure was entrusted to his elder brother, or more often, and always when he was away, he went to a barber's. He did not like ties, and wore one only when circumstances demanded it. Needless to say, he never learned how to fasten one. And he never wore a watch. 'What's that! You've got something ticking on your arm!' For him, time in the accepted sense did not exist. I recall many a missed train, and from the days of his youth there was the story of how he once attempted to overtake a plane by taxi by exploiting the plane's three-hour stop-over, which, according to eye-witnesses, was completely successful.

In taxis we often played a game which I first learned from him: from the four figures of the number of the car in front, one had to make 21 using each figure only once. I found it hard to follow as he triumphantly achieved this with a complicated arrangement of roots, differentials and integrals.

During dinner and frequently after it, we would drink. Misha did not like and did not drink wine, preferring something stronger: vodka, cognac or rum-cola, for example. To avoid any misunderstanding, I must say immediately that this was no slow sipping through a straw. To this day I remember the face of the barman in Wijk aan Zee, at our first meeting outside Russia in January 1973, when he had to pour five portions of cognac into one glass. A few years ago, Misha, who by then found it hard to take his drink, simply fell asleep at the end of a banquet in Reykjavik. This happened to him increasingly often, especially in his last years. Korchnoi and Spassky, who were also playing there, at that time had strained relations. But it couldn't be helped, and they looked at each other: 'Carry him out?' asked one. 'Alright', replied the other. The distance was considerable, but the opponents of his youth coped admirably with their task, and to the dumbfounded hotel porter it was explained that this chess player had thought for a long time, and he was very tired.

I remember very well his sparkling, always gentle humour, his laughter, infectious and often leading to tears, his instant reactions in conversation, and his trademark expression, usually around midnight: 'Waiter! Please change my table companion!' I think it was Sheridan who said that

genuine humour is much closer to good nature than we think. Misha's wit was always genuine.

Despite a physical defect – from his birth he had only three fingers on his right hand – he played the piano, and not at all badly. His first wife, Sally, remembers that on the evening when they met, Misha was playing some Chopin études. Besides Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov were his favourite composers. A few months before his first match with Botvinnik, he asked the well-known pianist Bella Davidovich, with whom Tal was particularly friendly, whether Rachmaninov's 'Elegy' was part of her repertoire. On learning that it was not, he said: 'Promise me that after my victory over Botvinnik you will play it at the concluding concert.' In the Soviet Union at that time, after the opening or closing ceremony of a chess tournament or match, there was the custom of arranging a variety concert. On the evening after the 17th game, when the match score became 10-7 in Tal's favour, the telephone rang in the Davidovich flat: 'You can begin practising the "Elegy"...' When she plays Rachmaninov's 'Elegy' Bella Davidovich always remembers Misha Tal and that evening in the Pushkin Theatre, when she performed it for the first time.

In the summer, during my visits when he was preparing for the match with Korchnoi, we often went to the Riga seaside, where he had been given a dacha, or, more correctly, three rooms on the second floor of a house beside the beach. When I look back now it requires some effort to picture Misha on the beach in sunny weather in an improvised goal (a T-shirt and a beach bag) recklessly, like everything that he did, parrying my attempts to score a goal. He had played goalkeeper in a university team, and he retained an attachment to football until the end of his life.

He never enjoyed good health. At that time, both in Riga and at the seaside, he suffered kidney failure, and frequently an ambulance had to be summoned. He was often in hospital, and during his life he underwent twelve surgical operations. His forehead bore the scars of a fearful blow to the head by a bottle in a Havana night bar during the Olympiad in Cuba in 1966. There was a well-known joke by Petrosian at that time: 'Only someone with the robust health of Tal could endure such a blow.' It was in the late 60s, that Misha became addicted to morphine. The veins on his arms were black and blue as if covered with ant bites, and the nurses, trying in vain to find a place that had not yet been touched. I know that later too, in Moscow, ambulances were forbidden to come at the summons of Tal. Rumours about this used to spread around the city.

At one of his lectures someone asked: 'Is it true that you are a morphinist, comrade Tal?' And his lightning response: 'What do you mean? I'm a chigorinist...' I think that this period lasted a couple of years. How he kicked the habit, I do not know. A guess: when the drug dose threatened to exceed legal limits, his strength of spirit and will themselves put an end to it.

Why did he play like he did, and why did he win? Of course, it is easy to hide behind the words talent or genius. Tolush, after losing the game of his life in his best tournament in 1957, said to Spassky: 'You know, Borya, today I lost to a genius.' At the Interzonal tournament in Taxco, another strong grandmaster said to me without any flattery: 'We are none of us worth Misha's little finger.' And Petrosian himself, who was sparing in his praise, said that in chess he knew only one living genius.

But that is not the point, or, at least, not the only point. I am reluctant to follow Korchnoi. When I asked him about the secret of Tal's play, he retorted: 'Well, you know, don't you? Once in a restaurant Tal said to me: "If you want, I'll look at that waiter, and he will come up to us."' Pal Benko thought similarly when he put on dark glasses at the 1959 Candidates tournament as an inadequate defence against Tal's piercing eyes. Still, the fact that his entire appearance, especially in his younger years, radiated some kind of aura – this is certain. Here we have approached the mystery, as I see it, of the Mikhail Tal phenomenon.

That face bent over the board, that stare of burning eyes, penetrating the board and the opponent, those moving lips, that smile which appeared on his inspired face when a combination had been found, that intense concentration of thought, pressure of thought rather – all this created something that the weak of spirit could not withstand. And when this spirit was combined with the energy of youth in the late fifties and early sixties, he was invincible. 'You, Mishik', the late Leonid Stein said to him in Riga in 1969 'are stronger in spirit than all of us.' He was strong in spirit, like no one else. Even when his organism was destroyed, right to the end, to his last days, his spirit remained unbowed.

In 1979, after winning a major tournament in Montreal together with Karpov, the 43-year-old Tal, who was more balanced and understood chess much better than in his years as champion, said: 'Now I would smash that younger Tal to pieces.' I have my doubts. And not because his favourite squares e6, d5 and f5, as he himself expressed it, were now guarded more strictly. No, the point was that the erudite and all-comprehending Tal would have had to withstand the concentration of thought and pressure of youth, which the best of the best had been unable to withstand.

In the summer of 1968, I was Misha's second for his match with Korchnoi, a very uncomfortable opponent for him. Tal lost the match 4½-5½. In the last game Misha, with Black, built up a strong attack in a Dutch Defence and could have won, but he delayed and the adjourned position did not promise more than a draw. A sleepless night of analysis followed, the resumption, the closing ceremony, and a lengthy wandering around Moscow, where he had so many friends. His energy, his inexhaustible energy... There was a wooden house in the very centre of Moscow, by the main Post Office, where the artist Igin lived, who has now long been dead. He was a friend of many chess players, who would drop in to see him at any time of day or night. Artists, poets, young actresses, bohemian Moscow of the sixties and seventies, and the picturesque host himself, who described himself succinctly as 'an old cognac-drinker'. And finally, the last flight from Moscow to Riga, no tickets, but they recognized Misha, and there we were in the pilots' cabin flying to Riga, night, Misha's flat, and I, no longer feeling anything, fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, the room was thick with cigarette smoke, and somewhere in the background Misha was sitting on a divan looking at me with a thick book in his hands that had almost been finished. He read exceptionally quickly, and I knew, in the Western part of my life, that when I set off to some tournament I had to take with me as many as possible of the books that were then banned in the Soviet Union. At the Olympiad in Nice in 1974, I gave him one evening a copy of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which had just been published, and the latest issue of a Russian émigré newspaper. The following morning, returning it to me after reading it all, he said: 'In the newspaper crossword I couldn't find a single word'. 'But the book, what about the book?' 'He writes very maliciously...' At the time, I was staggered by the reply, but a vague explanation, another aspect revealing the personality of Mikhail Tal, occurred to me. The point was that on the whole this did not interest him. He was not at all interested in material values, as if he dissociated himself from such matters.

After one of the tournaments in Tilburg I was sharing with him the procedure of shopping, which he so disliked. His pockets were full of five-guilder notes (it need hardly be said that he never had a wallet) mixed up with thousand-guilder notes that were very similar in colour, and I remember his sincere astonishment when he found another of the latter in one of his side pockets. And how many lost prizes there were, how many passports left in hotels, or simply forgotten somewhere. He looked askance at me, when in the hotel in Taxco I told him off for paying \$70 for a three-minute telephone call to New York. It is doubtful whether it had got through to him that in certain countries, and especially from hotels,

one should avoid telephone calls. Beliavsky told me that, when he scolded Misha for giving to the Sports Committee almost all of his prize of several thousand dollars for winning the World Blitz Championship in Saint John, Misha simply replied: 'Well, they asked me for it and I gave it to them.'

Of course, he was not interested in titles and awards. I think that even the title of World Champion did not greatly interest him. And he was not interested at all in the careerism, power or benefits (or what is understood by these words) of his fellow champions of later years. And, in contrast to them, it is altogether impossible to imagine him as a member of any party at all.

Although in later times he visited Israel, I think that Jewishness only interested him to a limited extent. I recall how, before one of the Olympiads, *Pravda* wrote: 'The team of the Soviet Union is represented by players of various nationalities: the Armenian Petrosian, the Russian Smyslov, the Estonian Keres, and Tal from Riga.'

He showed little interest in his health or his appearance, or in what others thought of him. He was as from another planet, and there was only one thing that really excited and interested him: chess.

He belonged to that rare category of people, who, as if it were something that went without saying, rejected everything to which the majority aim, and went through life with an easy step, a chosen one of fate, an adornment of the earth. In burning out his life, he knew that this was no dress rehearsal, and that there would not be another one. But he did not want to and could not live in any other way.

In January 1973, I played in the reserve master group in Wijk aan Zee, my first tournament after leaving Russia. Misha, who was playing in the main tournament, appeared every day in the general hall and, after studying my position, moved on to other games, and often also to games of the other groups, with an average rating of somewhere in the region of 1900... We often talked then until deep into the night and sometimes I would set off on foot from Wijk aan Zee to Beverwijk, where I was lodged just like most of the participants. The buses were no longer running, or, as it would be more correct to say, they had not yet started running. On the free day there was a big blitz tournament for all-comers, which lasted the whole day, and which Misha won. For the information of modern professionals: the first prize was one hundred guilders.

One of his favourite expressions was 'tasty chess'. And that was what he played. In his commentaries to his own games there was a predominance of good nature, respect for the opponent, and self-irony, which is so rarely encountered nowadays. He did not like writing his comments, but

preferred to demonstrate the games, while the text was recorded on tape. In older times he simply used to dictate. This was how he met his wife Gelya in the autumn of 1970, when for some formal reason he was not allowed into the Championship of the Soviet Union, which was being held in his own city of Riga.

He always used to write his move in short notation, and always before executing it on the board. In rare instances, when his opponent became very curious and looked openly at his scoresheet, he would cover it with his pen. If he did not like the move, he would cross it out and write a new one. In his later years he used to say increasingly often: 'I even wrote the winning move on my scoresheet, but crossed it out at the last moment...'

Somewhere around an hour and a half to two hours before a game he would eat something, but more for appearances' sake, then speak little and disappear into his own private world. That, for example, is what happened during his match with Korchnoi, and I realized that at such moments it was better not to disturb him. We ate in various places – this was a long time before the matches where everything was regulated to the nearest minute and calorie. It goes without saying that he adored everything that was bad for him: spicy, salty, peppery. Misha always smoked heavily, normally 2-3 packets a day – he preferred Kent – but when he was playing a further two could be added.

The last time I saw him was in Tilburg in the autumn of 1991. Misha had travelled from Germany, where he had latterly been living with his wife and his daughter Zhanna, whom he loved very much. He looked terrible, much older than his age, but he was still the same Misha. Replying to a greeting by one of his acquaintances, he said 'Thank you. Thank you for recognizing me.' He would usually sit in the press centre with his eternal cigarette, saying little, but every remark he made on chess was always to the point. He livened up a little when in his customary manner he showed an audience at the Max Euwe Academy one of his latest games: against Panno from the tournament in Buenos Aires. The young people of the early nineties looked at him as if he were Staunton or Zukertort. It was a miracle not that he was alive, but that he did not die sooner.

He also played in the last USSR Championship, and later wrote a big article for *New In Chess* together with Vaganian, with whom he was especially close in his last years. In February 1992, when I was in Cannes, I was asked to phone him. 'Listen,' said Misha, 'I am reading now about matches for the world championship, which I myself saw from close to. It wasn't like that, it was all different. Come and see me, and we'll write something together.' I promised. But for various reasons it kept getting put off and put off...

Misha played his last tournament in Barcelona. There were some young and promising players. He used to joke in his time about those that showed promise: 'At their age I was already an ex-World Champion...' For half the tournament he was really ill, with a temperature. In the last game, assuming that it would be a quick draw, he played 3. ♗b5 in the Sicilian, offered a draw, and received a refusal. In a lost position, already under attack, his young opponent himself offered a draw. This was the last tournament game won by Misha.

We spoke by telephone quite often, and a couple of days before my departure to the Olympiad in Manila 1992, I received a letter from him. Here it is:

Dear Genna!

Unfortunately, I have not finished the promised account of the tournament – I have been feeling very unwell. On Monday I am flying to Moscow for another appointment with the doctors. There will most probably be an operation. All the same, there will be plenty of free time as well as writing materials... In any case, I wish every success to you and all your least Russified (let's put it that way) team.

With warmest greetings. Misha

This was the last greeting that I received from him. Before going into hospital he played in a blitz tournament in Moscow, where he won against Kasparov and took third place behind Kasparov and Bareev, but ahead of Smyslov, Dolmatov, Vyzhmanavin and Beliavsky. A few days later, on June 28, 1992, Misha Tal died in hospital in Moscow. The official cause of his death was given as a haemorrhage in the oesophagus, but effectively his entire organism had ceased to function. He was buried in Riga, the city where he was born, in a Jewish cemetery alongside the graves of his relatives. He was 55 years old.

In his last years he looked older than his age, but I never associated him with being an old man – he always remained Misha.

Once I asked myself: 'Where do these boys from decent European Jewish families, Modigliani, Kafka, Tal, who are even similar in appearance, where do they get their all-absorbing passion for self-expression from? Where is the secret here?' This I do not know.

A few years before his death, Wilhelm Steinitz said: 'I am not a chess historian, I am a piece of chess history, which no one can ignore.' Anyone who has ever been or will be concerned with the amazing world of chess, will not ignore the illustrious name of Misha Tal.

Ruban lived in a small two-bedroom apartment with his elderly mother on her miserable pension in complete, overwhelming poverty. The rumour about his participation in some kind of 'business' during this period is not true, unless you want to use the word to describe his activity of selling at the market utensils that someone had brought from Poland in order to immediately drink away his share of the earnings that same evening. A couple of times he played in some opens in Poland, as Grodno is just a stone's throw away from the border, but his best years were long gone, his health was utterly destroyed, and although he was only a little over fifty then, his life had almost all been lived.

Eventually, drunk, he was hit by a car. They took him to hospital. His condition was critical for two weeks, then he began to recover, but suddenly he died. His mother had no money for a funeral; it was paid for by the woman who had been driving the car that hit him. There was no one to bury him, either. None of his former drinking buddies could find the time, so the coffin containing his body was carried by Vladimir Veremeichik and three of his pupils from the local chess school.

The official date of Ruban's death as recorded in his files was November 17, 1997, but this isn't correct: Veremeichik recalls that it was a warm day in early autumn, and the trees were still quite green. They buried him outside the city limits, about thirteen kilometres away, so keepers of Biblical tradition have nothing to worry about here. The place has no name, everyone just calls it the Cemetery. There is a plaque with his name on it, but no monument, of course.

After his death the former director of the local drama theatre came to Grodno. By then he was living in the United States and said that Ruban's play had been published there and apparently even performed somewhere; he wanted to give a royalty to Zhenya's mother, but it was too late. In St. Petersburg the Krylya (Wings) association, which campaigns on behalf of sexual minorities, is now based at a short distance from the Chigorin Club, where Ruban went so often.

Hesiod said he would rather have died sooner or been born later. Who knows what Zhenya Ruban's fate would have been if he had been born in a different country, or in the same country thirty years or so later? Thirty years is only an instant for immortal Kronos, but it's almost everything when you talk about the life of an adult. Would he have been a philosopher, as he had wanted to be all his life? A historian? A writer? A chess player? No one knows. We don't choose our times, we live and die in them. As did Ruban.

RATMIR KHOLMOV (1925-2006)

A miracle

The world of literature, music and theatre has its own internal value system. In this world there are names that are barely known to the wider public, but highly esteemed by their professional colleagues. In chess there are such names, too. One of them is Ratmir Kholmov.

In his long career Ratmir Kholmov has won quite a few tournaments and been among the prize-winners in countless events on every level. He won the Soviet Championship together with Spassky and Stein. He has an even score with Anatoly Karpov and he has beaten Robert Fischer. In the sixties and seventies he battled all the strongest chess players in the world and none of them could assume that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. He had a reputation as one of the best defensive players, but you can't accumulate many points by defence alone, not even by the most superb defence. Ratmir Kholmov was also a master of attack, the kind of attack in which improvisation and fantasy plays the most important part.

In chess history you can find many brilliant games, and here, as in art, there are no objective criteria: some like the intricate lace of Capablanca's games, others the attacks of Mikhail Tal. But on lists of the most beautiful games in the long history of chess the 'defender' Kholmov's wonderful games against Keres in 1959 and Bronstein in 1964 appear again and again.

'He has outstanding natural talent, the kind that comes from above', Viktor Korchnoi says of Kholmov. 'The originality of his talent is evident to the naked eye. This was the kind of talent Capablanca had. Kholmov knew something about chess without studying it at all.'

To this day Kholmov still has the patience for defence, in passive, unpromising positions that most masters fear like the devil. In an attempt to obtain some slight chances they prefer to quickly create a crisis, to rush onwards, sometimes not hesitating to sacrifice material. Kholmov is different: he is a master of passive defence, which he can continue painstakingly for dozens of moves, waiting for his moment. How did this unusual style develop, and where does this amazing stubbornness come from?

In the war year of 1943 the young riveter's mate Ratmir Kholmov was eighteen years old. When at the end of a hard ten-hour working day, no longer able to stand the heat from the molten lead that ceaselessly dripped on his face and the constant blows of the heavy hammer reverberating

through the metal rivet into his body, he started crying, an older worker scolded him: 'Pull yourself together, Ratmir, it's worse at the front!' This phrase 'pull yourself together' he never forgot, and it is the key to an understanding of Kholmov's chess style, and the rest of his life, too.

I talk with Ratmir Dmitrievich Kholmov in the Rossiya Hotel in Moscow, where he is playing in the Aeroflot tournament. There is still something in him from the Kholmov of the fifties and sixties: he's sturdily built, with a steep, high forehead, the shape of his fleshy biceps visible under an old-fashioned jacket. Except perhaps there is now grey in his slightly curly, unparted, combed back hair. In a few months he will be 80 years old. A couple of years ago he suffered a very severe stroke, but he has recovered and is playing chess again. His opponents in the tournament are young enough to be his grandchildren, and some could be his great-grandchildren. There is no doubt that most have never heard of him. Today's game has ended in a quick draw, and we have time for a conversation.

'I was born on May 13, 1925 in the town of Shenkursk. That's in northern Russia in the Arkhangelsk region. My father worked for the NKVD (predecessor to the KGB – GS) at the well-known camp in Solovki. That's where I spent my childhood. My mother also worked there, and of course they were both party members. My father drank a lot. In 1929 they arrested him for having relations with a woman prisoner and sent him to help build the Belomor-Baltic Canal, while we went back to Arkhangelsk.

'I was the only child in the family, but when mum and I came home, I found that I had a brother. He was five years older than me. It turned out that my mother had given birth to him before she met my father, left him in a village somewhere, and my father didn't even know anything about it. Later, when my father returned, of course he didn't like it much. My brother was sent to prison camps from a young age and was all over Pechora (one of the main camp complexes – GS), and later there was talk that he was a policeman for the Germans during the war, and some say that after the war he ran off to Germany, but I don't know anything about what happened to him.

'At that time my mother was working in a colony for juvenile offenders. We also lived in the colony with the young criminals. I was a hooligan myself, too. I often heard what they were talking about: some wise guy shows up, let's rob him, or take his bedclothes or something. I left school when I was a teenager and didn't get a good upbringing or a good education. When I gave up school and told my mother that I didn't want to study any more, I was going to be an apprentice electrician. She told me: go and work, any profession is respectable in this country. She piously believed in the communist ideas and fantasies.

'I learnt to play chess by accident. When I was twelve I was on a steamship with some other kids, going to a young pioneer camp, and someone said, "Do you guys want to learn how to keep score?" What kind of score, I thought. It was about chess. So I learnt to play chess. First I took on my neighbour, and he gave me bishop and knight odds and easily won. Then I went to the house of pioneers. Within three years I became city champion among adults. In those days I played whenever I had spare time, and I also went out with pals. My pals also played chess, mainly blitz. We didn't have clocks, so we made moves on command: one, two, three, four, five – move! And we moved! They brought beer with them, thick, velvety beer. In buckets. We scooped it straight from the bucket with ladles and drank it. I drank too, and I also started smoking.

'The war began and in the spring of '42 I was assigned as an apprentice to a machine operator on a fishing trawler. By the end of the voyage I was absolutely sick of fish. I remember this "snack", freshly heated cod-liver oil with bread crumbled into it. And in the autumn of that year I became a prisoner. After an illness I didn't want to go back to the shipyard and I got four months in a camp. At first they gave each prisoner 300 grams of bread a day. But they let me out and I returned to Arkhangelsk.

'Then I trained as a machine operator, I qualified and they assigned me as a riveter's mate. They transferred us to the Far East, so I found myself in Vladivostok. I ended up on the tanker *Sovietskaya Gavan* that was headed for America. We arrived in Portland, Oregon, lived there for a month, then we travelled around the whole country by train and finished up in San Diego. And in '43 America seemed like a real paradise to me. I was so amazed by the country that I forgot all about chess. Only then I began thinking about why they lived so incomparably better than us...

'On our way back to the USSR, to Petropavlovsk, we got caught in a terrible storm near Vladivostok which blew us onto a Japanese mine that flung us to the Japanese shore, and they interned us. The Japanese rushed out to come and look at us, including the women and children. We lived on our half-sunken ship for six weeks, quite close to the Soviet shore, and we had an abundance of grub. Then the tanker *Tuapse* came for us and life on that ship was like a fairy-tale – you turned on the tap and pure spirits flowed out of it.

'At the end of '44 they revoked the documents that allowed me to go on foreign voyages as a sailor. But I was happy that I'd got off lightly, as all the guys who'd been prisoners of the Germans were sent straight to camps, and I've met many of them. Then they assigned me to the steamship *Arkhangelsk*. I worked as a fireman, standing in the boiler-house steam, it was hell. Later I also worked as a chimney-sweep and did practically everything else.

‘After the war I went back to Arkhangelsk, became a chess instructor on the Sports Committee, won the city championship again and travelled to Tula for the national first-category championship. There I met Lyublinsky, Klaman and Furman for the first time – we could only dream of the candidate master title. I came fifth in that tournament. In 1947, I won the national Candidates tournament and became a master. In the same year I reached the final of the 16th Soviet Championship, then I played in Moscow in the Chigorin Memorial Tournament. There I played Botvinnik for the first time and I had the feeling that I was playing God. I remember that I strained every nerve during the game, I even pressed myself into my chair, but it didn’t help. I lost, of course, he was in a different class then and I didn’t know any theory at all.

‘The following year they allocated me a stipend of 1,200 roubles, good money in those days. So I became a chess professional. I was 23 years old. How did I prepare for games? I didn’t. Before a game I would toss a coin to decide how I would open the game. I never followed any trends. Everyone says I’m a defender, a congenital defender... You’ll become a defender if you don’t know any theory and you regularly get bad positions after the opening. You’ll potter about – as Black, almost always – in your own trenches.

‘I never studied chess at all, except when I looked at something in team trainings with Mikenas and Vistanetskis when I lived in Lithuania. I remember, Mikenas told me – this was published in the magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, there was an article on this variation. So I began subscribing to that magazine. From ’59, I remember it exactly, when I was almost a grandmaster already. What did I do all day long at that time? Nothing, I played in tournaments and read books. Anything I could get my hands on. I liked Feuchtwanger, Dreiser, O’Henry and the Russian classics.

‘In ’49 I played in the national championship. The tournament was very strong – Smyslov, Bronstein, Keres, Lilienthal, Flohr, Boleslavsky, I don’t even remember them all. Young people also played – Petrosian, Geller and Taimanov. Before the last round I was on 50 percent and had to play Black against Geller. To everyone’s surprise he was in the lead, half a point ahead of Smyslov and Bronstein, and if he won he would take clear first place. So Mikenas comes up to me before the game, we were friends at the time, and he says, Bronstein is offering some amount of money – I don’t remember now how much it was – if you don’t lose to Geller in the last round. I think he mentioned a smaller amount than what Bronstein had promised, as Mikki was a sly rogue... (laughs). But I not only didn’t lose to Geller, I beat him!

'In '60, when they put me up for the grandmaster title, Botvinnik himself spoke against it. "Let's wait a bit," Mikhail Moiseevich said, "let Kholmov play for another year or two and demonstrate his class." By then I had been among the prize-winners in national championships and won more than one international tournament. That was how they awarded the grandmaster title in those days! And now look at what they do, it's completely idiotic, this race after grandmaster titles. It's nonsense. I read recently that Russia got 22 new grandmasters in one year. A candidate master becomes a grandmaster within a year. And they are proud of this. They should be crying, not celebrating.

'In 1951 Bronstein was preparing for his match with Botvinnik and he invited me to play a training match. We played four games, three were drawn and I won the other one. I remember the opening of that game – the King's Indian Defence. Where are the score sheets from this game now? God knows, I didn't keep them, perhaps Bronstein has them somewhere in his archive.

'I underestimated myself in those days, believing that all the other chess players were potentially stronger. So it turned out that Bronstein played a world championship match in '51 and I was disqualified in the same year. For what? We were sitting around at a tournament, that's Tarasov, Nezhmetdinov and me, drinking, and two chicks came up to us. Well, Rashid was kind of in the way, he was about fifteen years older than Tarasov and me. You turn off the tape recorder now, turn it off, can you imagine if my wife reads this...

'Anyway, basically, Rashid was flushed, he was drunk, of course, he went out to the balcony and started throwing crockery off it – vases and plates. When Nezhmetdinov drank he had all kinds of psychoses, he'd lie down under a tram or do some other dumb thing. On this occasion nothing would have happened, other than the noise of the plates, but Kotov had to stick his nose into it. He started asking questions and whatever. There was an uproar, and the police came. To cut a long story short, they summoned all three of us to Moscow, to see Rodionov, who was chairman of the Sports Committee. Nezhmetdinov grovelled before him and they decided to pardon him as he was a party member, but Tarasov and I were disqualified for a year. They also cancelled my stipend, which I received as a member of the national team.

'I never travelled to the capitalist countries until perestroika. Never. In my life, who didn't I write appeals to, I wrote to everyone except Stalin. And I never got any reply. They sent me to Yugoslavia, to Cuba too, but then Cuba was ours, you see. Many times I had the documents ready to

travel to capitalist countries, but at the last minute they would refuse me. That's why my name is completely unknown in the West, as I have never played there once. In Moscow the Sports Committee always said at the last minute – "Unfortunately, they haven't issued you a passport"... And go complain to whomever you like. How and why I fell into this trap, I still don't know. True, I had been a prisoner of the Japanese for more than a month in '43, but there was no longer any war with Japan. Maybe they thought the Japanese had recruited me during that time? I don't know.

'In 1977, I go to the Sports Committee and the same woman functionary says to me, "You've been turned down again, Ratmir Dmitrievich. You know, if you go and see the KGB man, perhaps he'll explain it to you." So I went to see the KGB man. I go in. I ask why they won't give me a passport. He says, "Write an appeal, and don't forget to mention all the mistakes you've made, for starters. Then perhaps you'll get permission, you'll travel all over the world." But what did he mean? What mistakes? I got out to Germany for the first time in '89, when perestroika had already begun, there was some Open on, and they told me to go, to get my documents ready.

'Yes, probably. Probably my game with Keres in '59 was one of my best. After this game people asked me if it was all home preparation. Preparation! I thought for 50 minutes over the 12th move, from that moment on I had to thoroughly consider all the variations, as the knight couldn't move back. There's your preparation. The combination against Bronstein in the Soviet Championship of '64 also worked out beautifully.

'Yes, you could say that starting with Botvinnik I have played all the world champions. Who made the strongest impression? Well, Botvinnik was a monument, of course, a giant. Petrosian? It goes without saying that Petrosian was a wonderful player, but he played very stingily, to limit you, he was tight-fisted at the board – no, that's not for me. Kasparov is an outstanding champion, of course, one of the most outstanding in the history of chess. Karpov is outstanding, too, although personally I rate Kasparov more highly.

'How did I beat Fischer? That was in '65 in Cuba, when Fischer was playing by telex and they were transmitting his moves from New York. I was under a lot of pressure during that game, understanding that if I lost, they'd set all the dogs on me, they'd remember everything, and the evening before that game in particular. Why? The bar in the hotel was open all night and I was drinking Bacardi as you do. This rum is marvellous in Cuba. It was already very late when Smyslov came looking for me. Let's go, Ratmir, he says, I'll show you a variation that you can play against Fischer tomorrow. We went up to Smyslov's room and he showed

me a new idea in the Chigorin Variation of the Spanish, but I was so drunk that Vasily Vasilievich was sure I wouldn't remember anything.

'I sit down to play the next day and think to myself, what did you do yesterday, there'll be hell to pay for your behaviour, and it had to be right before the game with Fischer. They'll say, you son of a bitch, you were drunk as a skunk. I sit there, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists, not getting up from the chair. So you can imagine, the entire variation that we'd looked at that night came on the board. After the game Fischer congratulated me, but we didn't discuss the game. In that tournament in Havana there were many strong grandmasters among the 22 participants, but I didn't lose a single game and only missed first place by half a point.

'Chess has become a business. I remember, about forty years ago some chess player from Indonesia came to Yugoslavia, he really wanted to become a grandmaster, so they took him down a few notches and told him to bring more dollars next time. But nowadays you can set yourself up as a grandmaster within a year if you have a fat wallet... We have this Pushkov, for example. I was at the tournament in Azov where they made him a grandmaster. And he got there very easily, yes... And one day they say to me, will you play in a tournament for grandmaster norms, the pay is \$300. I think, why not play? Great, they say, so you don't actually have to play. What do you mean, I say. We'll make a tournament table, they say, you'll get your payment, and that's it... No, I reply, that's not for me, I'm not interested in these shady dealings. They think that if I like drinking, I'll do anything.

'It's true that I used to drink, and drink a lot, so to say. Would I have achieved more sporting successes if it hadn't been for the drinking? I guess so, because afterwards there's always a certain moral breakdown, somewhere inside you realize that you're doing something wrong. No, it's not the headache on the next day, it's just that I would feel ashamed of myself, I cursed myself and played less confidently, because with all my heart I felt I was deviating from moral principles.

'A few years ago I had a stroke. When this happened to me my wife brought a priest to the house, she paid him, and he read a prayer for the dying over me, as I was unconscious, dying. The priest administered extreme unction and sprinkled holy water on me, everything you're supposed to do. I hadn't been baptised though, my father and mother were communists, and real communists. Am I a believer now? No, I never was and I still don't believe in God today. I think it's all deception and illusion. Anyway, I was lying there in a complete coma for two weeks. Like a puppet, I did not move. And for the entire two weeks when I was in intensive care, my wife never left me for a second, she dragged me right back from the

next world, and if it hadn't been for her, her devotion and love, I wouldn't be here. This, of course, is a gift of fate, getting such a wonderful wife.

'I don't remember anything of those two weeks. No, there were no visions, no chess, no light at the end of the tunnel, only once I saw myself when I was young on a ship, we were fishing, and the nets were ever so shallow, and we caught crabs in them. And there was some island in the distance. My early youth. When I regained consciousness, they asked me my first name and surname, I remember that very well, but I don't remember much else. Then I went home, New Year's was just around the corner and I ask the neuropathologist if I can just drink some champagne. He says all drinking is forbidden. So I called the surgeon, the one who did the operation, and asked him the same question, as, you know, it was New Year's. This surgeon says, what champagne, down a glass of vodka and don't have any champagne... (laughs)

'No, I don't go to veterans' tournaments, you have to invest a thousand dollars for a tournament, with travel, hotel and everything else, and where would I get that much money? Ilyumzhinov doesn't give me money, he rules like a khan, he gives money to some people when he wants to, and he doesn't give it to others...

A few years ago we had the default here and although my wife immediately sensed it when our bank moved from luxurious premises in the city centre to some stable and she withdrew almost all our money in good time, we lost a few thousand dollars because of this default. You used to get 36 percent interest on the money that was in the bank, you old sod, my son said to me at the time, and now you've got your default. But what's a default? You're a westerner, you can explain it to me, what does this default thing mean?

'My son is a decent bloke, he often visits his parents, as he should. No, he doesn't play chess, I mean, he plays, of course, I give him queen odds, but he enjoys solving chess problems. Grandchildren, great-grandchildren, it's all well and good. I have everything. I have one grandson, a big businessman. He has started his own company. He builds saunas for rich people and often goes to Finland.

'Higher education, higher education, they say, but I look around and wonder what this higher education is for? And chess in schools? Karpov and Kasparov campaign for this, to make chess a part of universal education. To make chess a compulsory subject in schools. It's completely idiotic. Imagine, there'd be no firemen or machine operators in engine-rooms, no salespeople, everyone would be playing chess.

'Now that I'm retired, I get even more pleasure out of chess than when I was playing for real. Then I had a certain lack of self-confidence in life,

I worried about everything – them taking my stipend away, not sending me to some tournament, there was always some kind of fuss and worry. Now I calmly study chess for myself, for my own enjoyment. I play, too. For example, last year I played a Pole, Markowski. His rating is 150 points higher than mine, so what? This game didn't make much of an impression on me – during the entire game I easily held the position, but then I had a bit of bad luck, I ran out of time. And I should add that this was the first time in my life that I ran out of time. That electronic clock – you can't see what's happening on it. On the old-fashioned clocks everything's clear, when the flag goes up you're in time-trouble, you quickly make a couple of moves, but with the new ones...

'I was a member of the Komsomol in my day, but no, never a party member. Ever since I was a child I've had an aversion to this collectivism. From childhood. I never particularly liked the Communist government, although I wasn't a dissident, except when I was talking crap in drinking binges. Perhaps that's why they did not let me go abroad, I don't know.

'No, I don't think that Russia will ever become a normal country. This will never happen because of the type of people we have, a subjugated people. For the past sixty or seventy years we've lived in abject slavery and it will take a very long time to get this out of our system.

'Once I thought to myself, we Russians are all defective in some way. They say, you've got Tolstoy, you've got Chekhov, you've got Tchaikovsky, but so what? And the other thing I have noticed is this colossal aping of the West. They start something over there, we all copy it immediately. And what about Putin? How did I vote in the election? The way I used to prepare for games, I tossed a coin and voted for whichever party it indicated. Putin would have won anyway, it was all decided in advance. I'm nearly 80, I'm going to die soon, I can say what I think.

'How do I spend my day? I get up at exactly eight o'clock. I used to take a cold shower, but later the doctors advised me not to, they said it could be dangerous for my heart, so now I only get wet up to my waist. Then I have breakfast, a little herring and hot potato, and I drink tea or coffee with milk. Without sugar? What do you mean? Of course with sugar, how can you drink tea or coffee without sugar? At nine o'clock I go to the toilet with my English dictionary and spend half an hour in there. I'm learning the language. I've been learning it for sixty years already, I'm perfecting it.

'Then I sit down at my desk and analyse until noon, and I always enjoy this a lot. A computer? I'm almost 80, what computer should I have, why on earth would I need it? Recently I've been wrestling with a variation in the Evans Gambit, shall I send you the analysis? It's incredibly interesting! The only game with this variation was Morphy-Anderssen 1858, and

Anderssen won it! And for some reason no one ever played like that again. No one. I sit by myself, analyse, then write it all down, check it again and type it all out. Then I put it all away in my desk. But I don't publish it anywhere. I don't want to send my analyses anywhere, and believe me, I have some very deep ones.

'At exactly noon I eat apples. It's well-known that apples are very good for your health. Then I look at some more chess or I read. All kinds of rubbish, crime novels and that sort of thing. In the evening I have dinner and watch television, that's my whole life. Do any chess players call me? No, never. Why not? Because I'm almost 80, because my rating is 2440, because I'm shit and no one needs me.

'So Korchnoi called me a genius along with Capablanca. But for me Alekhine was a pure genius, there was always inspiration from God in his games. My first chess book, which I got hold of accidentally, was one of Alekhine's, *On the Road to the World Championship*. And of those I knew personally, Misha Tal was a pure genius, of course, and so was Lenya Stein. Ah, my dear Lenechka, he used to play cards night after night without a break, there would be a knock on the door of my hotel room at five in the morning, and I'd say, who is it, and it would be Lenya, he'd finished playing cards, and he'd ask, could you find me something to eat, he'd got hungry.

'Do you remember when the three of us were together in Riga, when I was playing the training match with Misha, and we spent every evening together? And we had dinner at Misha's or went to some restaurant or other. What year was that, '68, I think? I was forty-something then, and you were just a young lad, do you remember? Ah, Gennochka, do you remember when we shared a hotel room in Riga for two weeks? Do you remember when Lenya and Misha brought you back like a drunken corpse, true, they weren't too steady on their feet either, and they put you on a table and you slept on the table the whole night? I still can't understand why they put you on the table and not in bed, but you slept the whole night on the table anyway. But you can cut this out, God knows what people will think of you. Gennochka, these are memories of our youth, our youth...

'When I come here to the hotel I sit down at the board happily, but I'm already tired, it takes an hour and a half to get here. The metro with one change takes an hour and a quarter, then another fifteen minutes on the bus, and it's the same on the way back, every day, so work it out. It wouldn't matter if it weren't for the stairs at the exit of the metro, they're all covered with ice and they're very slippery, I keep slipping on them. From time to time you fall down and can't put all your bones back together... I'd gladly have stayed in the hotel during the tournament,

damn the expense, but at home I have everything right where I need it, my life is all arranged, my wife takes care of me.

'You ask if I'm satisfied with life? I've just been lucky, I wasn't killed when the boiler blew up back then near the Kuriles, I did not die from severe bronchial asthma, when I couldn't talk and I was suffocating for months, and you can't count all the scrapes I've been in during my life, but the most important thing is that I've got a fantastic wife and family, son, grandson, now a great-granddaughter too – that's also wonderful...

'Can I say that chess gave me everything in life? Yes, of course. Now I'm on a pension, the chess federation also gives me something, my wife also has an income, so there's nothing to complain about. But it's not only about money, I also have something to do that I enjoy. And not everyone has that. Other people retire and they're left with nothing to do, so they die quickly, because they don't know how to occupy themselves. But I have chess, it rescues me to this day. You know, analysis is analysis, but playing, playing is still what I really want to do. Chess is a miracle, of course. A miracle.'

Postscript: Ratmir Dmitrievich Kholmov died after a second stroke, from which he did not recover, in Moscow, February 18, 2006.