

Introduction

Memories of Syria

I was born March 24, 1960 in Damascus to a Syrian father, Muyassar Seirawan, and an English mother, Margaret Elvin. My parents met during my father's student days when he was earning his advanced University degrees in England. He studied artificial intelligence and computer programming at the Boots Institute in Nottingham. While in Nottingham he met my mother and married. Their marriage was not one made in heaven. My father came from a Muslim nation and, while not a practicing Muslim or particularly religious, was observant. My mother went to the Church of England and was raised in a Judeo-Christian culture although, like my father, she wasn't particularly religious either.

My standard joke is that my mother and father were gamblers, a trait that they passed to their children. That my parents played genetic dice and came up winners; thanks to my father, from the waist down I was a Bedouin Arab and, thanks to my mother, from the waist up I was an orthodox British gentleman. You laugh, but this is a dangerous game. You certainly don't want to get the genetic blueprint mixed up or reverse the correct move order. A British gentleman from the waist down? That would be a disaster.

My father was quite clever and earned a scholarship program whereby his western education was paid for by the Syrian State. In return, after he completed his studies my parents went to Damascus, where my father was obliged to serve as an officer in the Syrian military for a few years as repayment for his student loans.

The Seirawan family was shocked that my father brought home a bride, especially without the family's permission. No doubt he did not ask because he would have been refused. In so doing my father invoked the ancient tradition of seeking forgiveness rather than permission. His new bride had numerous strikes against

her: she was not Muslim; she did not speak Arabic and certainly suffered from culture shock. Nor did she endear herself when her first-born was a daughter, my sister Runda. Fortunately, with my birth, a son, all was forgiven. My mother's position literally went from near-outcast to queen overnight. This fortuitous event worked well for both of us.

In Damascus, our family lived in an apartment on the ground floor of a large apartment building with its own internal courtyard. The apartments were mainly occupied by extended Seirawan family members. Everyone fretted over all the others, keeping a careful lookout especially for the young. Meals were communal affairs, as were shopping, cleaning, schooling, holidays and the like.

I was a big baby, nearly nine pounds, whereas my mother, a slight woman at five feet, six inches tall and barely over one hundred and ten pounds, had to keep tabs on my sister and me, as well as others in our family apartment complex. She learned to speak Arabic, wore the Hijab, the headscarf for women, and passed for a local. It was customary for friends and strangers to stop and praise yours truly. "No," my mother would say, shaking her head sadly, "he is sickly and underweight." This customary response was intended to ward off the Evil Eye and not to attract attention.

My earliest two memories, and indeed the only ones from Syria, consist of pleasure and pain. I thought they were myths created in my imagination, but my parents confirmed them. The pleasurable memory begins in the living room of our apartment on the carpeted floor. On a table that was too high an unreachable box of chocolates resided. Able to resist everything except temptation, I wondered how to get the box. My solution was to tug the table cloth and keep pulling to the point that the chocolate box fell off the table, along with everything else on the table cloth. I then took the box, hid myself behind the couch and ate them all. I've had a love affair with chocolates ever since.

My second memory is again being on the carpeted living room floor playing "blocks" with another child from the complex. I looked up at the wall and saw cracks starting to appear, then a sudden and sharp pain happened to my ribs. In mid-air as the wall collapsed, I looked behind me to try to understand who or what caused the sharp pain to my ribs and was shocked to discover it was my mother. That was the end of my memory; the whole of it.

Later my mother explained what had happened. The courtyard needed repairs with the services of a bulldozer. During the height of the day's heat the driver took a nap. During his rest his knee hit the gearshift, and the bulldozer slipped into neutral. It began to roll down and away from the courtyard, crashing into our apartment building, smashing through the wall and stopping in our living room. The bulldozer came to rest directly on top of our play blocks. My mother had grabbed me with one arm and my playmate with the other, snatching us sharply moments before the wall would have toppled down upon us both.

Pleasure and pain. A common twinning.

Again, it should be mentioned that in our apartment building the families were all rather large with numerous children; misfortune with a lost child or even a lost mother was not uncommon in those days. In one family, a mother lost her life during delivery and the child, a girl, Haifa was born. The families gathered and decided, collectively, that my mother, who was nursing me, was also to be given the duty of nursing Haifa. In the Arab tradition a “mother” is not necessarily the birth-mother but can be the one who gives milk, who nurses the child. In this situation, Haifa became a sister to me and a second daughter to my mother.

England

In the early 1960s, Syria was buffeted by social strife. Government leaders rose and fell. Military squads as well as gangs with guns patrolled the streets, and my mother and father became concerned that Syria was spiraling into social chaos. They decided to leave Syria and return to England. It wasn't easy and indeed at the time it was a dangerous undertaking. My father had a special passport thanks to his student and military careers, and was considered a vital person. He needed special permission to leave the country, something his true passport would not allow. He therefore bought passports on the black market and the family pretended to be British tourists. On the way to the airport, we were sternly told by my mother to speak English only, an instruction that neither my sister nor I could remember. Our memory is only that we obeyed it, and the family arrived in England on March 11, 1964.

My brother Nabeel, or rather Daniel, was born October 27, 1964, a few months after our arrival in Nottingham. Nabeel or Nabil in Arabic means noble. Such a marvelous ordination to start one's life would be welcomed one would think. My brother would have none of it though. Virtually from the time he could speak, he christened himself. “My name is Daniel,” he would politely say. “Please, call me Daniel.” If we called him Nabeel he would refuse us, and soon we would all call him Daniel.

I relished England. Here memories spring to life easily. Early schooling, coloring books, the joys of riding a scooter, playing conkers, marbles, wellies (rubber boots), climbing trees, hot water bottles for bedtime and treacle pudding all come rushing to mind. It seems I was particularly adept at marbles, which my mother despised. I'd come home every day with a pocketful that I had won at school from the other boys. My mother would make sure I went to school without any marbles, but I'd consistently come back with a pocketful as I'd borrow a first marble from a friend and then start winning them from the other boys. I have one quite distinct memory; one boy frustrated with his losses threw his marble as far away as possible in order not to lose. Not to be outdone I threw my marble after his. It was one of those impossibilities. His marble went into a groove, as did mine. My marble clicked against his and I had won. My circle of friends laughed for days.

My father had many friends from his student days and one whom he liked very much would come for family gatherings, a certain Ken Whyld. They kept in contact with one another for decades. Towards the end of his life Ken visited Seattle, where we all had lunch together. For those who don't know, Ken Whyld is considered a great chess historian, having co-authored the *Oxford Companion to Chess*. We live in a small world.

The New World

In 1967 my father was hired by Boeing, the famous airline manufacturer, which is how the family came to live in Seattle, arriving on June 1, 1967. We moved into a home in the Queen Anne Hill neighborhood, where I started on my path in the American educational system at Queen Anne Elementary School.

Chess had no part in my life during this early period. My father liked the game and tried to teach me. While attracted to the physical appearance of the pieces, it was physical sports that held my fancy and in America I soared. American football, baseball, dodge-ball, wrestling and bicycle riding were my new worlds. The days of scooters, marbles and conkers were long gone. The New World offered new sports, and I decided they were all exciting and wonderful.

I was extremely athletic and a fast runner. Sprinting, track and field, and jumping all told of a potentially promising career. It was over before it began. Within one year of our arrival, in March 1968, my mother and father separated and were divorced within a year. The children lived with my mother and as the years passed my Arabic language skills melted away so completely that I now speak only a few words. In 1970, my mother married for the second time, to Richard Valance. A man as different from my father as two people could possibly be.

Valance was a tall man, well over six feet, bald-headed, a flaming red-beard and penetrating blue eyes. He had been born in Detroit, where he roamed with street gangs; a particularly violent clash with rivals had cost his best friend his life. Valance felt he would be next. He decided to leave America, went to Thailand and became a Buddhist monk. In Thailand, for the first time in his life, he was at peace. His spirits soared with his studies, and long periods of meditation brought him inner harmony. He was confounded when his Abbot told him he had learned all he could and that he was to return to America, where his destiny awaited.

In my father's household order reigned supreme. Everything from sleep, to bathing, to meals, to school, to playtime held a schedule. With Valance there was no schedule whatsoever and everything was played by ear. From Seattle, the family traveled down the Pacific coastline through Oregon to California, settling in Palm Springs for a few months, then Corpus Christi, Texas and finally Virginia Beach, Virginia in 1970 became our destination. Our constant moving played havoc with schooling, but somehow I wasn't dreadfully impacted. Within weeks I had caught up with my classmates, and my sports ability made me a favorite in class.

Of all the places we stayed, I liked Virginia Beach the most. Now it was my turn in heaven. The allure of the ocean was a siren's call. I body-surfed and used a surfboard as often as I could. I had always loved swimming, but it was in Virginia Beach that I really found my calling. I endeavored to help the lifeguards as best I could and volunteered to assist them at pools. The beach was my new world.

How was it that the family moved to Virginia Beach, of all places? Needless to say, my mother's marriage to Valance had an unusual impact upon her, and suddenly her interest in spirituality and mysticism flamed brightly. Meditation and mysticism were enormously attractive fields of interest to her. Guests to our home included yoga teachers, astrologists, numerologists, homeopaths, Buddhists, Hindus, Born-again Christians and folks from just about every walk of life. The famous somnambulist Edgar Cayce, "The Sleeping Prophet," had set up the Edgar Cayce Association for Enlightenment (ARE) center in Virginia Beach, and my mother felt a calling to go and study there. Edgar Cayce would lie down to rest and put himself in a trance and while "under" he spoke with a "voice" to help people cure themselves. Thousands of readings were recorded with advice on how to treat virtually every type of sickness and disease. My mother wanted to study the readings. The very first day that we drove to Virginia Beach in our station-wagon we went to the ARE center, and the first person we met was Hugh Lynn Cayce, the son of Edgar Cayce. That very afternoon we were in our first home, at Hugh Lynn's invitation.

In Virginia Beach, I went to W. T. Cooke Elementary School and became a newspaper boy to earn a little extra money. I took my duties very seriously indeed and delivered my newspapers during Hurricane Lisa. The winds against me were so strong I couldn't pedal my bike, front-loaded with plastic-bound newspapers, which stood transfixed by powerful wind gusts as I tried to push my pedals downward. I delivered my whole route by foot, straining against the lashing winds. My mother was absolutely beside herself with worry as the hurricane gyrated against our taped-opened windows. When I returned home she was about to give me a good tongue-lashing until she noticed that I was totally pale and as cold as an ice-cube. She told me that I needed a hot bath and that I should get undressed as she prepared the tub. She turned on the cold water tap only, and as I dipped my foot into the water I complained to her that she had made it too hot. I drained some of the water and again turned on the cold tap. A half-hour later I drained more water and turned on the warm tap this time and stayed in the bath for over an hour. Eventually, my body temperature returned to normal levels. I don't know how low my temperature actually fell, but with hindsight I was probably quite lucky that I hadn't done any permanent damage. (The family joke, of course, is that serious damage *was* done.)

I don't know where my competitive nature comes from. Whether in sports, school or as a newspaper boy, I endeavored to be best. Not just best, but excel-

lent. Yes, I wanted to win and not just within the rules, but within the spirit of the rules as well. If I felt a referee made a bad call, I would give the ball back to the other team, not always endearing myself to my teammates in the process. This aspiration for excellence got me in trouble in other ways as well. Most often in the classroom. An “A” or “A+” while appreciated wasn’t enough, I wanted one hundred percent. Most of my classes were rated on a sliding scale with the extremes determining the letter grade. My scores of one hundred percent were resented. Oftentimes I was encouraged “not to get them all right.” Disputes I found frustrating and vexing. What was the point? Many teachers found ways of giving me extra homework or different assignments, mostly book reports.

Back To Seattle

Again, my very happy world was tossed upside down in 1972. My mother decided that she had completed her studies and research at the ARE Center, her marriage to Valance wasn’t faring well, and it was time to return to Seattle. I was heart-broken. My memories of Seattle weren’t endearing; in particular, it rained a great deal and although it is on the Pacific Coast I didn’t remember doing any surfing as there were no waves in the Puget Sound. I resisted but failed, and the family moved to Seattle in the summer of 1972 when the school year ended. At the time, I considered myself an outdoors person; television had little interest for me except if my favorite American football team, the Dallas Cowboys, was playing. That and professional wrestling of course.

My worst fears of Seattle were realized upon arrival. Hot summer days were brief. Overcast clouds common. The family washed up on the shores of Lake Washington near Sand Point, an area north-east of the University District. A few miles further north down the road, Sandpoint Way, was a “beach”. A place on the lake where there was a large float that you could swim out to and dive from, using the low and high diving-board. This lakeside park with its picnic benches was my boring solace. When it rained, as it frequently did, the children were stuck indoors.

Since many of our belongings hadn’t yet arrived, the family took to visiting our upstairs neighbor, David Chapman, a paraplegic who had a wonderful television on which we could watch the Olympic Games. It was David who taught me the peculiar game of chess, where I fumbled badly trying to figure out the strange hops of the knights. David defeated me easily, and in order to get competitive I would visit a coffee-shop, The Last Exit on Brooklyn, in the University of Washington district, where other chess players met to play blitz. Chess had arrived in my life.

At this point, I’d like to fast forward by six years to 1978/79. My mother had married for the third time, to a Hawaiian, Kelena Nakata. The family was now living in a condominium in a large complex on Rainier Beach, this time not on the northern part of Lake Washington, but on the most southern part, miles

away from downtown Seattle and even further from the University of Washington, which is north of downtown. I mention the latter point just to emphasize that anyone who was to study at the “U-W” (locally pronounced as the “U-Dub”) would definitely not live in Rainier Beach as that would be at least 40 minutes away, with good traffic, from campus.

As is universally known, the British are the worst cooks in the world, and my mother is a particularly bright-shining example of this truism. Her failing was a blessing. For purposes of self-preservation the children all learned to cook well. One day I came upon my mother in the kitchen, always a dangerous sign, and suspiciously asked her what she was doing. She explained that neighbors had just moved in below us and she wanted to make the new arrivals feel welcome and was therefore baking a pie. Needless to say, I was rather dubious and wondered if after tasting the pie our new neighbors would ever be seen again. I needn't have worried. Triumphant, my mother took her pie downstairs and knocked on the door. A nice lady opened it. My mother dropped her pie on the floor and began crying. So did the other lady. They cried hard and openly, hugging one another hysterically and with strength. It was Haifa. After nearly two decades apart, mother and daughter recognized one another instantly.

Haifa had married a man, Mohammed, who was studying at the University of Washington. In a city of nearly one million inhabitants, Haifa came to live underneath her mother. It is a story which if it came from a novel would be laughed at as ridiculous. Truly, life is stranger than fiction.

My Chess Career

In 1979, my career received a huge boost when I won the World Junior Championship (under 21 years old) in Skien, Norway. While I had scaled the ranks in the US, it was this result that brought me to the attention of organizers around the world, and in January 1980 I was invited to the elite event in Wijk aan Zee, Holland. As a rookie in the big leagues how would I fare? “Wijk” was a breakthrough event for me. I tied for first, earning my final grandmaster norm in the process. Seven and a half years after taking up the game I became a grandmaster. It was quite a ride.

Besides the grandmaster title, Wijk aan Zee 1980 brought me something extra special as well: a deep friendship with Victor Korchnoi that has lasted decades. At that time Victor was the world's second highest-ranked player. He invited me to work with him in his 1980-1981 Candidate Matches and World Championship campaign. We worked hard, and thanks to him my chess knowledge soared. By the middle of the 1980s I qualified through the Interzonal cycle and became a Candidate (Montpellier 1985). For the rest of my career I played in elite matches and events around the world, eventually breaking into the ranks of the world's top ten players.

In 1988, I started a chess magazine, *Inside Chess*, which had a twelve-year run.

I sold the business to Hanon Russell in 2001. During the 1990s playing on the professional chess circuit while simultaneously running a bi-weekly magazine was hard work, and I was constantly busy and often quite tired. It wasn't easy to find the time to train properly and prepare for duels with the world's best players. Oftentimes at the board I found myself playing on my fundamental knowledge of the game. No spectacular opening novelties from me – just hard-nosed chess. At the end of 2003 I retired from the tournament circuit, a 30-plus-year career that brought me friendships and wonderful memories from around the globe.

Mine has been a strange life, with lots of sharp moves both to the left as well as to the right. Journey with me now as we embark into the world of chess and to a special sphere: the world of the élite. Meeting and competing with not just the best, but the best of the best, the World Champions. In my career I've been blessed. I have met and spoken with Max Euwe and Mikhail Botvinnik, analyzed with Robert James Fischer, and played against Vassily Smyslov, Mikhail Tal, Tigran Petrosian, Boris Spassky, Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov. That is nine out of the thirteen World Champions, whose line extends back to 1886 and Wilhelm Steinitz. It is in these duels, the games played at classical time-controls against these champions, that I judge my playing career. Chess players often ask: "who was the best ever?" as well as "who were the top ten?" The best of the best? Universally, three names are always included on such lists: Fischer, Karpov and Kasparov. Not always, but sometimes, the lists include Spassky, Smyslov and Tal as well. Truly, I have lived in a time of giants.

Presenting the material in this book raised awkward problems, to say the least. Should I present the games in the chronological order in which they were played? If I did that, I would find myself jumping back and forth from one player to the next and would have difficulty giving a complete picture of my opponents. For example, my first game with a World Champion was in 1980, against Boris Spassky, followed a month later by an encounter with Mikhail Tal, then a game with the reigning World Champion Anatoly Karpov, and so on, and so forth, with players getting constantly mixed around. It seemed best to create a separate chapter for my duels with each player. In this way I could devote a full chapter to giving an overall impression of them as people, as well as discussing their chess styles.

That decision made, one logical approach was to present the giants in chronological order, starting with Paul Morphy and working my way through Wilhelm Steinitz, Emanuel Lasker... I would pause when I reached Vassily Smyslov, the oldest giant with whom I dueled, five times, keep going, eventually getting to Bobby Fischer, Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov. However, such a presentation didn't appeal to me. For one thing, I didn't have any games against Bobby, so after presenting chapters featuring games suddenly there would be a chapter with no games at all. More importantly, I was the product of the "Bobby

Fischer boom” in 1972. Bobby was the beginning of my career. It was far more attractive and accurate for me to start with him. So I have.

After Bobby, I give my impressions of our great World Champions, trying to share my first-hand and second-hand stories while reaching back into history. With Vassily Smyslov, Mikhail Tal and Tigran Petrosian I’m on solid ground.

The bulk of this work focuses upon three players: Boris Spassky, Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov, the three giants I played most often. There are two chapters about Karpov: the first covering his reign from 1975 to 1985 and the second dealing with the period when he became the FIDE World Champion again. There are also two chapters about Kasparov: the first concerns his reign from 1985 to 2000 and the second the “after death” when he lost his title to Vladimir Kramnik. I go backwards and forwards a great deal, because I played against the players often and sometimes in the same event. Then there are breaks of many years before I dueled with them again.

The greatest chess rivalry of all time was between Karpov and Kasparov. It lasted for decades, and between them they played an unprecedented five World Championship matches. But the chapters devoted to them include much information about other players as well. The resulting book is a virtual stew of stories, anecdotes and games with the giants. Trying to separate them into a neat chronological order would have taken away much of the enjoyment I derived from writing the book. Coupling stories and games together made this book much more fun to write, and, I hope, fun to read. It turns out that a chess career is much like an interesting game – not as neat and tidy, simple or easy to follow as some would wish. My hope is that this book is all the better for not being a neat tidy work. Any failings are entirely my own.

The final chapter concerns the Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE) or World Chess Federation, and the very important function that this organization serves. I’ve offered my views on its successes and failings, and how it might function better in the years ahead.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have happened without the gentle persuasion of the Everyman Managing Editor Dan Addelman and without his willingness to extend my due dates. It took well over a year, as I worked slowly. My thanks to chess historian Edward Winter, of *Chess Notes* fame, for his advice and much encouragement besides. Thanks too to Hanon Russell of the Chess Café for permission to reprint my annotations from *Inside Chess*. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my life-long friends Bruce Harper, who kindly traded his author’s hat for that of copy-editor, and John Donaldson, for all his research help. Gentlemen, my deepest thanks to each and every one of you.

In the games presented in this work I’ve endeavored to make it clear when the games were classical, the greatest test of chess mastery, when the games

were rapid (an hour or less per player) and when they were blitz games (five minutes per player). In my annotations I've paid particularly close attention to the classical games, less so to the rapid and even less to the blitz. Those five-minute games are to be enjoyed and not to be taken too seriously. More often than not, I came away with my jaw needing a reset, but I got in some punches and a few jabs of my own.

Finally, I'd also like to give a special word of thanks and recognition to Robert Anthony Karch and Bill Goichberg. Robert ran open Swiss events for decades in the Pacific northwest, and I cut my teeth on his events. He really was "Mr. Northwest Chess" for ages and if he hadn't organized competitions my opportunities to compete early in my career would have been slim indeed. In a similar measure, Bill of "World Open" fame ran tournaments across the nation. I competed in many of his Continental Chess events, earning my FIDE norms at times. Thank you both very much!

Enjoy,
Yasser Seirawan