Genna Remembers

Genna Sosonko

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Figurine symbols

We will not be using letters to denote chess pieces (as these might not be familiar to non-native English speakers) but rather the ‘figurine’ symbols, as follows:

Chess piece	Letter	Figurine
King	K	
Queen	Q	
Rook	R	
Bishop	B	
Knight	N	
Pawn	–	–

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Introduction

Half a century ago I left a country whose red color dominated a large portion of the world map. One way or another, the fate of almost every single person described in this book is forever linked with that now non-existent empire. Many of them ended up beyond its borders too. Cultures and traditions, and certainly not least of all a Soviet mentality, couldn't have just left them without a trace. Having been transplanted into a different environment, they had to play the role of themselves, apart from certain corrections with regard to the tastes and customs of a new society. Nevertheless, every one of them, both those who left the Soviet Union and those who stayed behind, were forever linked by one common united phenomenon: they all belonged to the Soviet school of chess.

This school of chess was born in the 20's, but only began to count its true years starting in 1945, when the representatives of the Soviet Union dominated an American squad in a team match. Led by Mikhail Botvinnik, Soviet Grandmasters conquered and ruled the world, save for a short Fischer period, over the course of that same half-century. In chess as well as ballet or music, the word 'Soviet' was actually a synonym for the highest quality interpretation of the discipline.

The Soviet Union provided unheard-of conditions for their players, the sort of which their colleagues in the West dared not even dream. Grandmasters and even Masters received a regular salary just for their professional qualifications, thereby raising the prestige of a chess player to what were unbelievable heights. It was a time when any finish in an international tournament, aside from first, was almost considered a failure when it came to Soviet players, and upon their return to Moscow they had to write an official explanation to the Chess Federation or the Sports Committee. The isolation of the country, separated from the rest of the world by an Iron Curtain, was another reason why talent and energy often manifested themselves in relatively neutral fields.

Still, if with music, cinematography, philosophy or history, the Soviet people were raised on a strict diet that contained multiple restrictions, this did not apply to chess. Grandmasters and Masters, all varied in terms of their upbringing, education and mentality, were judged solely on their talent and mastery at the end of the day. Maybe that was why the Soviet school of chess was full of such improbable variety, not only in terms of the style of play of its representatives, but also their different personality types.

The system was built as a gigantic chess pyramid, at the base of which were school championships, which were closely followed by district ones. Later, there were city championships, regions, republics, and finally – the ultimate cherry on top – the national event itself. The Championships of the Soviet Union were in no way inferior to the strongest international tournaments, and collections of the games played there came out as separate publications in the West.

That huge brotherhood of chess contained its very own hierarchy within. Among the millions and multitudes of parishioners – fans of the game – there were the priests – Candidate Masters. Highly respected were the cardinals – Masters. As for Grandmasters, well…they were true gods. Every person in the USSR knew their names, and those names sounded with just as much adoration and admiration as those of the nation's other darlings – the country's best hockey players. In those days, the coming of the American genius only served to strengthen the interest and attention of society towards chess, never mind the fact that by that point it had already been fully saturated by it.

The presence of tons of spectators at a chess tournament in Moscow as shown in the series 'The Queen's Gambit' is in no way an exaggeration; truly shown was the golden age of chess. Under the constant eye and control of the government, chess in the USSR was closely interwoven with politics, much like everything else in that vanished country. Concurrently, the closed and isolated society in which it was born only served to enable its development, creating its very own type of culture – the giant world of Soviet chess.

I was never indifferent to the past. Today, when there is that much more of it than the future, this feeling has become all the sharper. The faster the twentieth century sprints away from us and the thicker the grass of forgetting grows, together with the verified power of the most powerful engines, that world of chess will be gone soon enough as well. It was an intriguing and colorful world, and I saw it as my duty to not let it disappear into that empty abyss.

Genna Sosonko, Amsterdam May 2021.

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A Border under Lock and Key

After a crushing defeat (0:6) in his match against Fischer (1971), Mark Taimanov, whose baggage was 'accidentally' found to contain the banned work of Solzhenitsyn, underwent a number of sanctions: he was stripped of his 'Honored Master of Sport' title, lost his place on the USSR National Team, and his stipend was cut by a third. When Korchnoi lost the final Candidates Match to Karpov (1974), he gave an interview to a paper in Yugoslavia. In it, he did not offer much praise to the winner, but instead insinuated that his defeat was a result of pressure coming from "up top".

Later, and with some extensive processing from the media, Korchnoi would also lose his place on the National Team and see a reduction in his GM stipend as well. Still, all of these measures were absolutely meaningless when compared to the real punishment: both Grandmasters were barred from traveling abroad. Taimanov and Korchnoi had already traveled outside the country on multiple occasions, and thereby had gotten a real taste of this particular forbidden fruit, therefore being poisoned by it for quite a while. That is why for them this specific punishment was especially cruel. Later, when the sinner Korchnoi had turned to Karpov seeking help, the discussion wasn't about retaining his spot on the National Team, and

Viktor Korchnoi's 80th Birthday. Mark Taimanov with the honoree.

especially not about recovering his full GM salary, but rather one thing, and one thing only – the lifting of the ban from traveling abroad. I'm not sure if Korchnoi would have stayed in the West, were it not for another interview he gave to the AFP (Agence France-Presse) in 1976 during a tournament in Amsterdam. In answering the reporter's question, he also harshly criticized the Soviet government's decision (among other things) to boycott the upcoming Chess Olympiad in Israel. "After that interview I truly understood that they would most likely ban me from leaving the country ever again!", the defector-GM remembered later.

In 1988, during the Olympiad in Greece, Elena Akhmilovskaya defected to the United States. "There was no political significance or frantic dissidence behind my decision", the former world championship candidate explained upon returning to her native Krasnoyarsk some sixteen years later, " 'Perestroika' had only just begun, and the danger of being 'blacklisted for travel' thanks to my relationship with an American was quite real…". In essence this particular motive behind the radical actions of Korchnoi and Akhmilovskaya, as well as Lev Alburt and Igor Ivanov, who also didn't return home from their tournaments abroad, was the major one.

Even if the right to international travel was just one of many rights which a person in the Soviet Union did not possess, the absence of it was no less painful. That right belonged to the government exclusively, and for that reason, even those

stars who found themselves at the very top of the giant chess pyramid, could never really rest easy when submitting their travel forms. While he was champion, there was plenty Mikhail Tal could get away with.

Later though, there were times when Tal was pretty much removed from the actual boarding ramp of the plane. This happened once before a trip to Yugoslavia, and again in 1968, when as part of the National Team he was supposed to represent the USSR at the Olympiad in Lugano. On the way to the airport, and with luggage in tow, every member of the team arrived at the State Committee for Sport office, to receive parting words and wishes, as was the tradition. After some extravagant, yet absolutely meaningless phrases, the head functionary ended his speech with the casually-cheerful: "While you, Mikhail Nekhemevich, can return home to Riga. Smyslov is already in Lugano for the FIDE congress, and he'll be the one replacing you...".

In the early 70's, Tal became chronically 'blacklisted for travel'. The reason for his participation in the Estonian tournament at Viljandi (1972), alongside eight local Masters, and three CMs, wasn't just related to his unconditional love of the game. At the time, there was another travel ban imposed on the ex-world champion, and he was happy to play in any tournament, even within the USSR.

Having lost the '72 championship match to Fischer, Boris Spassky would already no longer have been able to pick and choose international tournaments at his own discretion, and as for those personal invitations which were sent to the Federation, he was never even informed of them. In 1976, Spassky wed a French national and left for the West. Upon returning to Russia in 2012, he would often say that the only reason he even married was for the ability to freely travel abroad. Whether that really was the only reason is something only Boris Vasilievich himself can know, but "moving from Moscow to Paris gave me a chance to participate in all international tournaments", he explained recently.

Paul Keres was supposed to fly to Australia once to give a series of simultaneous exhibitions. All the forms were in order, the visas were granted, the tickets bought, and the oh-so-distant route already expertly calculated. The Estonian Grandmaster arrived in Moscow from Tallinn. Once there, and at the very last moment, the Soviet Embassy in Canberra decided that Keres' arrival would certainly be cause for unnecessary excitement among Australia's Estonian immigrant community, and for that reason the trip was cancelled. When the Federation official informed Keres that "Australia was off", all while trying to avoid looking at him, he only smiled: "Well, I guess in life anything can happen…". Immediately after the war, Keres had already been banned from traveling for a few years; he was well-aware that confidence in the success of an overseas trip could only be had when

the plane actually took off. Upon meeting his old friend Max Euwe at Schiphol airport, and just one day before his untimely death, Paul Keres said the following a number of times: “Yea, I’ll probably hear it from Baturinsky (the head of chess in the USSR-G.S.) – after all I stayed in Canada a couple of extra days without permission…”.

Botvinnik’s interview, which was published in November of 1983 by the largest Russian-American newspaper ‘Novoye Russkoye Slovo’, had obviously made the rounds in Moscow. Many of his statements were not particularly well-received by Party officials, and he was told “to come into the office”. The Patriarch held fast. Given Botvinnik’s lack of ‘understanding’ regarding their objections, the head of the propaganda department of the Central Committee imposed the following resolution: “Henceforth we feel it appropriate to limit the overseas travel of M.M. Botvinnik”, and with that, and right up until the start of Perestroika, he did not leave the country for the next four years.

Stripped of his ability to go abroad was David Bronstein as well, a given since he didn’t sign the anti-Korchnoi letter, while Ratmir Kholmov, who competed successfully in the championships of the Soviet Union on multiple occasions, got to play in Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia and in Cuba, but was barred from traveling to a ‘Cap-Country’ (as it was called in those days, i.e. Capitalist Country). Why was such a penance imposed upon him, the Grandmaster would never know. Submitting his forms to travel to countries not within the USSR’s sphere of influence, Kholmov got used to hearing the following phrase down at the Sport Committee on multiple occasions: “They didn’t give you the passport again, Ratmir Dmitrievich…”. This was standard practice in those days: deny overseas travel without explanation, and with absolutely no room to appeal.

Alexey Dreev also became a ‘blacklisted traveler’ for a number of years. If others attained the ‘blacklisted’ status after having achieved some measure of success, earning their titles and stipends, by contrast, Alexey had only been fifteen when he was unexpectedly banned from traveling to an international event. Only in 1988 and at the height of Perestroika was he able to travel abroad again. Dreev became a very strong Grandmaster, and even played in Candidates Matches at one point, but who really knows how his career would have gone if not for those unfortunate four years. The list could go on and on, and it’s probably simpler to name just those few Soviet players who never had a problem with traveling, than the ones for whom the process of formalizing a travel passport was filled with all manner of issues.

* * *

Out of any potential privileges available to a Soviet citizen, a trip abroad was among the most tempting and inviting – especially when considering that the overwhelming majority of citizens in that gigantic country did not have this right. Beyond the prestige, and beyond the fact that a completely different world now opened up, such a trip could also be of substantial financial benefit, and by no means an insignificant one. Officially, there was no such thing as professional sports in the country: in the Soviet Union all manner of sport was considered as being of the amateur variety, even though that was only true on paper. Athletes traveling abroad would only receive a daily allowance and tried to save every dollar they could especially on food. The author knew many athletes and musicians who only ate either canned goods or smoked sausages from home for the duration of their international trips. There was nothing shameful or unique about it, and those familiar words of the Vladimir Vysotsky song about a simple Soviet tourist, going abroad: "He said: Live in comfort – save, don't be foolish, be good. And, look here, don't trick yourself and die from overconsuming canned dry food" were easily understood by many a Soviet citizen without the need for any further clarification. Chess players were the only exception to this rule. Why exactly did they find themselves in this privileged position?

Mark Taimanov remembered how on the 4th of July, or Independence Day, during the USSR-USA match in Moscow 1955, there was a reception at the country villa of the American ambassador. Arriving for the banquet were the most powerful faces of the Soviet government, including Khrushchev himself. Laughter, jokes, fun and joint photographs soon followed. Taimanov: "Suddenly Khrushchev came up to me: 'So you Soviet chess guys often travel abroad to compete. Do you make any money?' – 'Oh no, Nikita Sergeyevich, we just represent our country, ideology, and accomplishments – all of this is completely selfless' – 'What about when you play at home?' – 'Well what would we live on otherwise?' was my natural reaction. Khruschchev stood and thought about it for a bit. 'Listen, that's just not right! So how does it go? You don't take anything from the capitalists who have money to burn, while from us decent folk of modest means, you do. That just shouldn't be. You have to take from them, and you have to take as much as possible!' "

Taimanov went on to say that a few days later a special directive circulated around the Sport Committee regarding "the provision related to the foreign assignments of Soviet chess players" where a new and extremely important clause about monetary compensation had been added. There is of course no easy way to authenticate the dialogue between the Grandmaster and the then leader of the Soviet government, but be that as it may, and almost up until the very last few years of Soviet power, those rules remained unchanged. Players were allowed to keep 800 dollars from both the fee, as well as prize sum; as for the rest, which was

surrendered to the Committee, half was paid out in Soviet rubles. The Soviet ruble was non-convertible, lending credence to the typical joke that there was a pound of rubles in every one dollar. That's why rubles weren't of the utmost importance, that being the currency which one had permission to spend at his own discretion instead.

The 4th of July, 1955. A reception at the country villa of the American Ambassdor to the Soviet Union in honor of Independence Day. Nikita Khrushchev stands on the left of a small man in a white suit, who happens to be the famous Samuel Reshevsky.

What did that mean back then? "If after a trip to America I make less than 25 rubles on the dollar, I consider the whole trip a bust," the masseuse Valery Krylov once enlightened me. He came to the Netherlands with Anatoly Karpov and had previously traveled all over the planet with the Soviet national basketball team. I respectfully nodded at him, while quietly registering in my mind that in those last few years of mine in the Soviet Union, I earned somewhere in the neighborhood of six dollars a month according to Krylov's rate.

Even so and without resorting to this mind-blowing exchange rate, based purely on the domestic market for high-demand items that have been purchased abroad, a decent international result meant an unbelievable sum of money for an ordinary Soviet citizen. The author of these passages has never met a single Soviet player, who in going abroad, did not concern himself with the issue of 'shopping'.

Tigran Petrosian once found himself passing through Paris. He was offered a chance to see the city and visit places like the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. “The Mall is my Louvre”, Petrosian responded, “I need paint for my country house!” Even within the pages of Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik’s memoirs, there is a fairly detailed and lengthy description of a “beige suit” he purchased in London for the wife, and which “never grew old – twenty years later my daughter wore it while traveling somewhere too”; and burners to heat his dacha: “but only the ones with a Swedish frame, just the Swedish one”; also a boiler acquired in Germany, that replaced the burner, as well as many other goods, acquired abroad.

There is no shortage of descriptions regarding the manner in which Vasily Vasilyevich Smyslov made his purchases in overseas stores. After reviewing his new wardrobe at the hotel, as well as having a comprehensive discussion of it with his colleagues, he would triumphantly return the purchased items to the store, either to get a refund or exchange. It’s hard to say when exactly he developed this ritual, but definitely by the mid 70’s, when we became closely acquainted, and when I would sometimes accompany him on these ‘shopping’ trips. Obviously, by this point this had already become an old and incurable condition. I think that when the first exchange occurred without any issue, he wanted to experience this feeling ever more often, until later when it became a routine thing. We are talking about famous champions after all, and it’s not as if they went abroad just that one time.

The only exception was Tal. Now sure Misha would always return with his own laundry list of orders, with which he was dutifully supplied at home before the trip. At the same time though, he would delay the shopping up until pretty much the last day, or would instead task one of his colleagues with this particularly hated assignment. Grandmaster Leonid Shamkovich, who was with him at a tournament in Spain, remembered: “Tal had a huge list of things to buy but Misha didn’t buy anything for himself, even though he had plenty of money. He wore an old worn-out blazer. In spite of the difficulty of the task, we convinced him to buy a jacket and shoes. He didn’t go to the store, and instead just took some money out of his wallet and said: ‘please just buy it all yourselves…’. Even if the purchaser returned having only partially filled the order, as once happened to me in Tilburg, Tal wouldn’t get upset either: ‘Thank you for this’, he would say. Back home we’ll explain that this hasn’t arrived in the Netherlands yet… Still that was Tal”.

Mere mortals used their rest days during a tournament to take care of the shopping, or sometimes as little as a few hours at the end of an event instead. Having foreseen this, some people did their shopping before a round, reducing preparation for the forthcoming game to essentially the bare minimum. In other words, practically all their free time was dedicated to the purchase of goods that were in short supply at home.

It was advisable to spend the valuable currency economically. While participating together at some international event, both Keres and Botvinnik went for a walk on a hot summer day, and Keres suggested that they should get a cool drink, the mere suggestion of which was cause for certain shock: “But that costs money! I turned into a cheapskate abroad”, the Patriarch remembered, “ ‘But it’s fun to spend money’, Paul retorted and…treated me!”. This episode, mentioned by Botvinnik in his memoirs, left quite the impression on him and he definitely took note of it.

In making any such purchase, it was critical not to forget anyone who had made the trip possible in one way or another, even if it was someone who might have only contributed in expediting the paperwork. Among these were staff members of the Sports Committee and the Chess Federation. After all, these modest-salaried Soviet workers clearly understood what sort of benefits they provided a person traveling internationally, especially to a ‘Cap-Country’. There was some degree of nuance here as well, given that it wasn’t just the official of the Sports Committee, and it could also mean even a simple typist on whom the speed of the actual procedure would depend. That’s why when the time came for these considerations, a pack of gum or cigarettes was enough for some to place certain more important comrades in an entirely different category.

“Your height, and yea, even your build is similar to the director’s in our Sports Committee. Can you help me out?” Tamas Georgadze said, all while squinting at me in appraisal. He lived in the republic of Georgia and was a member of the Soviet National Team at the time. We participated in the same tournament in West Germany and went to a huge department store on a rest day, where I tried on some kind of special leather coat that wasn’t considered cheap even by western standards. “We won’t hide behind the price”, Georgadze said putting me in my place, “… fits, like a glove…”, and went to the register to pay.

When returning home from abroad, unused currency could also be exchanged for certificates or checks. In the USSR there existed special stores where only those could be used to buy goods. Admission was restricted for the common folk. There was a security guard at the front entrance and he could (and did!) demand that random customers showed that they had the certificates. If they did not, then obviously the store would be off limits. The certificates or checks were broken down into various categories. A blue bar meant they were of the lowest grade, while a yellow one meant they were somewhat better: you could acquire a greater variety of goods for those. The most valuable were the ones without bars, and for which you could purchase many things unavailable to holders of certificates with the bars.

Needless to say, almost everything in these exclusive stores came from abroad and was otherwise not available to the general public. “There, every store is like

one of our certified ones, only better", Grandmaster Alexander Chernin explained to acquaintances who had never been abroad, upon returning from some tournament in the West. The whole of the West looked like one giant certified store to them and the satiric slogan: "Communism is Soviet power plus the certification of the whole country!" which parodied the famous one by Lenin: "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" did not require any further explanation to anyone.

The complete triumph of little Estonia in Wijk aan Zee in 1964.

This immense responsibility, combined with nervous tension could have led to the most unexpected of outcomes. For instance, the 1964 Wijk aan Zee tournament had a sensational conclusion. Of course, Keres' victory, ahead of Larsen, Ivkov, Portisch, and other famous Grandmasters, could hardly be called a sensation. However, what made it so was him sharing first place with his countryman Ilvo Nei – a young Master from Tallinn who was a completely unknown commodity in the West at that point. An analogous sort of impression was made by the performance of Master (later Grandmaster) Anatoly Lutikov, who took clear second at Wijk aan Zee in 1967, finishing a mere half-point behind the winner Boris Spassky. However, this

didn't always happen. Igor Platonov's performance in the very same Wijk some three years later ended in a total fiasco. Despite showing good results in national tournaments he finished at 'minus four' and somewhere among the very bottom of the field.

Many years later, Dutch journalist Tim Krabbé wrote: "Platonov's frightening collapse was inexplicable. A Soviet participant has never played here so badly before. It's hard to pinpoint the cause. Perhaps it could be the impression the West had on him. At the end of the day this was a time when Soviet tourists could be completely overwhelmed just from walking into a regular supermarket in any western European country. Still another explanation was also possible – the pressures of that familiar feeling of 'now or never' which a Soviet participant, and one without any particular title at that, must have felt, when playing in his first overseas tournament. If he, as a representative of the Soviet Union, was unable to show a decent result, this trip could turn out being both his first, and last one". In fact, Platonov's international trips did stop after that: until Perestroika, he played in one single tournament outside of the Soviet Union, and even that one – Cuba (1972), didn't compare to the 'juicy' Netherlands by any stretch.

A post-mortem by the two representatives of the Soviet Union Igor Platonov and Mark Taimanov. The very young Ulf Anderssen attended the analysis (Wijk aan Zee 1970).

Those traveling to capitalist countries knew: another opportunity like this might never present itself again. Alexander Kochyev's famous words, exclaimed

during the most critical game of the European Junior Championships contested in the Netherlands (Groningen 1975) probably flashed through the mind of other Soviet players at one point or another as well. Hitting the clock and seeing his last move blundered a pawn, Kochyev, in stepping away from the board, loudly announced across the entire playing hall: "F---k! The last time I travel anywhere!"

Alexander Kochiev (on the right) and Alexander Beliavsky. Soviet Team Championship, Ordzhonikidze 1980.

It was during the deep post-Perestroika period when I once chatted with Smyslov. "I want your advice on something", Vassily Vasilyevich said. "I received an invitation to play in a tournament…" and he proceeded to name some South American country, the name of which I no longer remember. It was, however, exotic, far off, and with a significant difference in both time and temperature. The conditions were modest at best. "So Genna, what do you think?" – "A strange invitation, Vasily Vasilyevich. Personally, I'd decline." – "What do you mean decline? It's an invitation! An international tournament! Or do you think, I should hold out for more?" Smyslov reacted with trepidation to pretty much any trip abroad up until the very end. For little Vasya Smyslov, who accompanied his father to Moscow tournaments in the '30s, Lasker and Capablanca weren't just legendary players, but foreigners and aliens as well. After the war he himself started to travel abroad regularly. What