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Introduction

We are used to reading about glorious feats by chess masters from the past, but we often are unaware that chess drove some unfortunate ones to nervous breakdowns, asylums, and poorhouses. In contrast, the lives of child prodigies, the wunderkinds of chess, typically have overflowed with success – these prodigies have achieved unbelievable sports feats at a very young age. Yet, sometimes the promising trajectory of the wunderkind clashes with fate, leaving the youngster to take on the unfortunate plight of a martyr, too. This book recounts all of these stories – the woe of the aged master, the triumph of the prodigy, the sometime reversal of fortune in the other extreme.

The reader might be surprised to learn that famous champions like Steinitz, Alekhine, Schlechter, and Rubinstein died in misery. Chess masters presume that they will enjoy long careers until the age of 40 or 50 or beyond; but the years of hard competition often are enough to ruin one's health. We also should not forget the marathon character and bad conditions of some super tournaments of the past, e.g., Vienna 1882, London 1883, and New York 1889. In London 1883, for example, the battle was so fierce that the winner, Johannes Zukertort, did not draw a single game. Pre-arranged "grandmaster draws" were unknown in those days. In some tournaments, drawn games were replayed multiple times, and in one extreme case, the French master Rozenthal had to replay 20 drawn games in one tournament. We only can imagine the toll such intense competition took on his body and mind.

Yet, there was no choice for the masters of the past; they could not think about rest. They lived in a poor world and their income was scarce and barely enough to support a family. That's why only a few professional players before World War II lived to a happy old age. Others died from consumption or perished in the war. Today, the chess martyrs are only a sad reminiscence of the past. The world has become richer, the social status of the game has become higher, and the best and most talented have become assured of a decent living.

Recent prodigies continue to push the limit of chess achievements. The Ukrainian Ruslan Ponomariov won the FIDE world championship before his 18th birthday. His compatriot, Karjakin, became a grandmaster at 12. Indian Humpy Koneru crushed the supposedly unreachable record of Judit Polgar and earned the GM title three months earlier than she did, at 15 years, 1 month and 27 days. Humpy currently is number two in the women's rating list, behind Judit.

Of course, not all wunderkinds are lucky. The lives of six, from the total of twenty-four represented in this book, ended in tragedy. Two of them – Americans Paul Morphy and Robert (Bobby) Fischer – suffered from mental disorders, and the ends of their careers were marked by struggles with severe psychological problems. Three others, Gioachino Greco, Mark Stolberg, and Klaus Junge, died under unusual circumstances: Greco's traces were lost in distant lands, while Junge and Stolberg perished in the throes of World War II.

You won't find full biographies here. What you will find is the essence of players, the triumphs and tragedies that shaped their lives. You will get a fascinating look at chess and chess players from a perspective you never may have considered before.

Karl Schlechter
(1874-1918)

He died of starvation, but remained true to his principles

Karl Schlechter is the most noble, generous, and honorable of the great masters whose names are written with gold in the pages of chess history. He was a gentleman to the core, both in chess and in life, with his own views on ethics and morality. His friend and colleague, the Austrian grandmaster Ernst Gruenfeld, remembers how he witnessed something incredible at one tournament:

"Schlechter's opponent, a strong Viennese maestro, got into serious time trouble. It was a complicated position, and yet Schlechter, who had lots of time, began to make his moves without pressing the clock in order to give his opponent some more time to analyze the difficult position."

Schlechter was born March 2, 1874, in Vienna, to a prosperous family. According to his mother, he became acquainted with chess when he was 13, which is rather late, and even then he didn't show too much interest in it. He grew up a smart and industrious child, always having excellent marks in elementary school and later in a specialized trade high school. After graduating, he started work for a prestigious trade company.

About that time, he started to show more interest toward chess. The Chigorin–Gunsberg match in Havana in 1890 played an important role in capturing his attention and imagination. Schlechter studied all 23 games of the match, and began to delve into chess theory, reading various books. The young man started visiting coffeehouses where chess games were a favorite pastime, and gradually he fell under the spell of the great game.

At that time, Vienna was known around Europe as a city with many fine coffeehouses. They offered excellent conditions for playing chess and gradually attracted many enthusiastic players, who became regular visitors. Karl Schlechter turned into a regular at the Merkur coffeehouse, and in just a year he already was the strongest and most respected player there. In one more year (1892), he made another step, which brought him further from his career as a merchant and closer to the enticing world of chess. He became a member of the Vienna Chess Society. This brought new possibilities for the young player, as he could play with, and learn from, the most renowned chess masters in the Austrian capital. Soon, Schlechter himself attained the reputation of a chess master, a part of this elite circle of players.

He played his first official games in 1893, when he drew a match against Georg Marco, a respected Viennese maestro of Romanian origin and chief editor of the *Wiener Schachzeitung* magazine. By an irony of fate, twenty years later he would entrust the magazine to Schlechter, who improved it considerably and managed it until the end of his days.

This match attracted the attention of chess specialists, not with its even result, but due to the curious fact that Schlechter and Marco drew all ten games. It was the first step toward the nickname The King of Draws, by which Schlechter would be remembered. This first match revealed what was considered his greatest weakness, the propensity to draw games, which remained until the end of his career and prevented him from reaching his full potential. Two decades later, world champion Emanuel Lasker would say: “If his strategy was combined with initiative, his style would have been flawless and he would have been invincible.”

The decisive step

The match with Marco was a turning point in Schlechter’s life. After it, he took the most important decision in his life, leaving forever the solid trade company that guaranteed him a cloudless future and becoming a professional chess player. Obviously, he didn’t have ambitions to lead

the life of a rich businessman; this decision was dictated by his passion for the game. On this occasion, famous German player Jacques Mieses noted: "Schlechter was a true chess artist. He was one of the players who received great pleasure and fulfillment from the game."

The newly-fledged chess professional dedicated himself with zeal and passion to his career. In the period from 1894 until his death in 1918, he participated, with few exceptions, in all major international tournaments and he always was among the winners. His top results were in Munich, 1900, where he shared 1-2 place with Pillsbury; Ostend in 1906, first place; Vienna 1903, tying for 1-3rd place, and first place at the 1910 Hamburg tournament.

However, he became most popular after his participation at the famous Hastings tournament in 1895. There, he finished in ninth place among twenty top-class players and again showed why they called him The King of Draws, drawing twelve games.

This rather peaceful approach for a professional continued later on. It caused many controversies at the time, but very few could see the true reason. Schechter had a strong mind, acted like a true gentleman, and always defended his honor and principles, but he was physically weak, with fragile health; on top of everything, he suffered from tuberculosis and was a heavy smoker. The stress during tournaments and the malnutrition, combined with poor living conditions, especially after the beginning of World War I in 1914, aggravated his tuberculosis. It gradually consumed his strength, and sometimes he couldn't endure the long and intense chess battles.

Before giving an account of his famous world title match with Dr. Lasker in 1910, I would like to describe another interesting episode. It happened before the game between Lasker and Schlechter at the 1909 Petersburg tournament, and was described by Leonid Verhovsky in his book on Schlechter's life:

"Schlechter wasn't only exquisitely courteous towards his opponents, he was also impressively punctual. He was never, ever late for a game in his long chess career. Because of that, his reaction when Lasker arrived 30 minutes late for this game was quite unusual: the arbiters and spectators were astonished, as Schechter disappeared from the hall after Lasker's arrival. They found him in the garden, strolling leisurely. When they told him that his opponent had made his first move, Schlechter calmly glanced at his watch – and continued to walk. The arbiter's attempts to convince him to return had no effect. Half an hour later, Schlechter reappeared and answered his opponent's first move.

'I don't need a time bonus,' he explained after the game."

Lasker and Schlechter signed a secret protocol

Some games always have caused rumor and speculation. As for the match between Lasker and Schlechter in 1910, the truth was revealed much later. The Austrian maestro proved to be the most dangerous among the challengers for Dr. Lasker's title. He was an exceptional chess talent but also a typical intellectual of that age. A man of vast knowledge and erudition, his ability to analyze and generalize was astounding. However, he also had some disadvantages. He was too modest and delicate, and too diffident, especially when playing against the strongest players. Before that, he had finished with draws eight out of ten games, and the match against Lasker probably was the only chance in his life.

Why did Lasker accept the Viennese chess master's challenge so easily? In 1906, he had written: "Schlechter is possibly talented enough to win the title, but his nature is too peaceful, he lacks the temperament and the qualities of a fighter, so I doubt he could win a match for the world title."

Of course, that statement was backed up by Lasker's confidence after his wins in the matches against Marshall, Tarrasch, and Janowsky, as well as his remarkable success at the 1909 super tournament in Petersburg. However, even the first two games astounded chess fans and specialists alike: the champion barely managed to save himself with two draws. They were followed by two more draws, and Schlechter won the fifth game. After four more dramatic draws, they had to play just one more, decisive game.

Everyone expected that Schlechter would play for a draw in the last game, but the unthinkable happened. The Austrian grandmaster played more aggressively than ever. The game was very sharp; Schlechter made a mistake and lost. Before that, however, he deliberately omitted a few chances for a draw. That caused a storm of speculation and wild guesses, and the commentators noted: "It will forever be a mystery why Schlechter didn't force a draw, which would have won him the match and the world title."

Decades would pass before the truth was revealed. During the negotiations for the match rules, Lasker and Schlechter had a verbal agreement that the challenger would claim the title only if he had at least a two-point lead at the end of the match. Schlechter agreed, because in the beginning they were planning to play at least 30 games, but he couldn't raise the necessary money, so the duel was cut to only 10 games.

The match rules weren't published anywhere and the above-mentioned clauses were secret, known only by the players and two confidants. The protocol from the match was revealed much later, after the death of the last of the four men who knew the secret.

After the match, they asked Schlechter:

"You proved that Lasker isn't invincible?"

"I only proved that chess is invincible," he replied.

Schlechter died from complete exhaustion

The Austrian gentleman's life was a hidden drama, which turned into a tragedy. This unbelievably modest and honorable man couldn't compromise his principles even in the days of total misery. When a foreigner, who didn't know him, offered to play a couple of games for a bet of 10 crowns at the Vienna Chess Club, which was a considerable sum at the time, he refused, saying: "I don't think you can win against me."

And he told his name.

"Schlechter was like a man out of this world; he just couldn't benefit from his talent," grandmaster Rudolph Spielmann recalled. "His goal in life was to ensure a comfortable life for his old mother, but he failed. As far as he was concerned, he was incredibly modest. A cup of beer and a cigarette was everything he needed." Schlechter spent his last years in poverty and hardship. Weak and exhausted, he became one of the victims of the Spanish flu pandemic in the end of 1918.

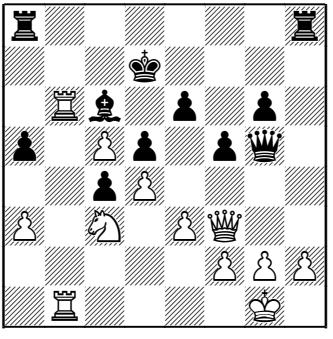
"Chronic tuberculosis and complete physical exhaustion due to malnutrition," the doctors wrote in his patient's file.

A rook crushes Black's defense

In Monte Carlo 1904, for the first time, the organizers did not provide for a most beautiful game prize. Later, Reti proclaimed the following game for a moral victory.

Queen's Gambit
Schlechter – Marco
Monte Carlo 1904

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♗g5 ♗e7 5 e3 0-0 6 ♘f3 ♘bd7 7 ♖c1 a6 8 c5 b5 9 b4 c6 10 ♗d3 a5 11 a3 ♖e8 12 0-0 ♘h5 13 ♗xe7 ♕xe7 14 ♘e5 ♘xe5 15 ♗xh7+ ♔f8 16 ♕xh5 ♘c4 17 ♗d3 ♕f6 18 ♗xc4 bxc4 19 b5 ♗d7 20 bxc6 ♗xc6 21 ♖b1 g6 22 ♕h6+ ♔e7 23 ♖b6 ♔d7 24 ♕h3 ♕g5 25 ♖fb1 ♖h8 26 ♕f3 f5



It seems that Black has protected everything, but Schlechter breaks through with the help of two sacrifices:

27 ♖xc6! ♔xc6 28 ♘xd5! ♖ab8 29 ♘f4+ ♔d7 30 ♖b7+ ♖xb7 31 ♕xb7+ ♔e8 32 c6 1-0

Boris Spassky
(born 1937)

The boy from the Young Pioneer's Palace

The distant rumble of shellfire grew louder by the day as the war's front crept closer and closer to young Boris Spassky's home city of Leningrad. Thousands of people were evacuated, among them two little boys, brothers Boris and Georgi Spassky, who were placed in the convoy's second echelon.

The first echelon was wiped out completely by a German attack, but the second one managed to retreat. Later on, the two little brothers found refuge in an orphanage in the Kirov region.

As the summer of 1941 was coming to its end, the boys anxiously were anticipating the return of their parents. But it would be two years before they would finally arrive, after managing to sneak through the German blockade by pure luck.

"The arrival of my parents saved me," Boris would recall later. "When they took us from the orphanage, I looked like a bag of bones. I was so weak, I couldn't get up from bed.

Boris was born in Leningrad during the biting cold of January, to construction engineer Vasily Vladimirovich and Ekaterina Petrovna, in perhaps the harshest period of Russian history, and he soon had to face its many challenges.

He received his basic education in the orphanage, where he also learned to play chess. His first partner was his brother Georgi, three years older. Georgi wasn't exactly an experienced teacher and his grasp of the rules was dubious, so their chess games usually ended up in fights.

When their parents finally joined them, they moved to a region near

Moscow, where, once again, they had to fight hunger and bad fortune. On top of everything, they faced another shock – the family broke up and the sole responsibility for feeding the family fell on their mother's frail shoulders at the same time that she gave birth to her third child – Iraida.

In 1946, Ekaterina Petrovna and her three children returned to their home city of Leningrad, which was in the process of postwar recovery, and the tormented family moved back into their old communal flat.

At that time, Boris's interest in chess reawakened, turning into his life's passion. This is how he described it himself: "Once, in the park on the Kirov islands, I found a chess pavilion, with a pediment decorated with black horses. The weather was wonderful. A slight breeze from Finnish Bay ruffled the birch leaves. Northern sun was shining upon the glazed porch. There were tables with built-in chessboards."

At first sight, there was nothing incredible and attractive to amaze a 9-year-old boy, Boris recalled.

"But what I saw was a fairy tale world. And it fascinated me," he said. "I was captivated by an uncontrollable passion. Passion for what? The chessmen? The festive, beautiful feeling around the place? I can't really tell, but I was enthralled, and suddenly this seemed as the only thing in the world that mattered."

Boris went to the pavilion early the following morning. "I watched for hours how others played, without venturing to try myself," he said. "One, maybe two weeks passed like this. I just took pleasure from watching the pieces and their movement on the board. They were freshly lacquered, and had a very distinctive, unique scent."

Russia's great chess generation of 1937 now had two titans – the brilliant romantic Mikhail Tal and the classic, Boris Spassky.

"In Leningrad I met a new chess prodigy"

On the Nevsky Prospect, right across from Anichkov Bridge, there is a massive pale yellow building. It once was called the Anichkov Palace, and later the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace. Many famous Soviet chess masters made their first steps in that building, and here the tenth World Champion, Boris Spassky, started his conquest of the chess world.

Here's what he remembers from that time: "Finally, the day came when my father enlisted me in a children's blitz tournament. Right in the beginning, I received the Scholar's mate on the f7-square and wept bitterly," Boris said. "That was my first encounter with the flip side of the fabulous chess world. But my shyness disappeared and I just had

to play every single day. I couldn't help it. The chess section was open from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., and I returned home around 10 p.m."

Boris recalled coming home so tired that he often fell asleep on his bed without even undressing. Often late for school as a result, he begged his mother to write notes excusing his tardiness and absences.

Soon Boris achieved an unexpected success, which predetermined his road in life. In the Palace, he was spotted by the keen eye of respected master and coach Vladimir Zak, who took him in as a student.

In only 18 months under Zak's tutelage (1947–1948), Boris covered the long road from beginner status to First Category rank.

"Zak wasn't only a teacher, showing me different opening variations," Boris recalled. "Even with his modest income, he still invited me to meals together with his huge family – and I had a ravenous appetite. His countless acts of kindness allowed me and my family to get on our feet."

After so many difficult years, fortune finally smiled upon Spassky. With the aid of Vladimir Zak and GM Grigory Levenfish, he was granted a monthly scholarship of 1,200 rubles.

While Levenfish watched him play in the Pioneers' Palace, he exclaimed, "In Leningrad I met a new chess prodigy"

The scholarship proved to be a huge, undreamed-of financial support for the family.

Spassky worked on chess with Zak until 1952, when Alexander Tolush took his place. He aimed to develop a drive for the initiative in Spassky's style of play, which was a bit too passive. The results of Spassky's steady work with two experienced coaches multiplied his talent; he set records as the youngest Soviet player to achieve First Category (at age 10), Candidate Master (age 11), and Master title (age 15).

Bucharest: the decisive test

In the beginning of the 1950s, Romanian capital Bucharest hosted traditional international tournaments. During the Cold War, they were among the few chess competitions in the so-called "Eastern Bloc."

The strongest of the Bucharest tournaments was held in 1953. It included three Soviet grandmasters, each of whom already had qualified for the forthcoming Candidates Tournament: Vasily Smyslov, Tigran Petrosian, and Isaac Boleslavsky. Young talent Boris Spassky also was entrusted to play in the tournament, but he was eclipsed by the three elite grandmasters. However, he created a sensational upset as early as the first round, when he defeated Smyslov.

This strong start inspired the wunderkind and ensured his im-

pressive performance in the games to follow. Spassky's coach, Tolush, finished first with 14 points, followed by Petrosian with 13, Smyslov (12.5); and Spassky, Boleslavsky, and Laszlo Szabo, who shared 4-6 place (12 points).

This was considered an incredible success for the young player, who competed with some of the world's best players and proved to be their equal, if not better yet.

Spassky's memorable achievement in that match determined his future. His education in the Faculty of Journalism at the University of Leningrad suddenly seemed unimportant; he was admitted into the world's chess elite and his future life was set in stone.

Two years later, Boris caused another sensation: he qualified for the finals of the USSR Championship and tied for 3-6 place in the company of Botvinnik himself, as well as Petrosian. This ensured his participation in the Interzonal tournament.

In the following years, the talented player's career had its ups and downs. He achieved impressive victories, but they were followed by failures. Boris Spassky began to overcome the obstacles one by one on his road to the world title, as late as 1963, when Tigran Petrosian was occupying the chess throne. Their first clash for the title took place in 1966, but the champion defended his crown.

This motivated Spassky even more, and he was unstoppable when he confidently embarked on the road to the next match for the world title. He defeated Bent Larsen, Efim Geller, and Victor Korchnoi, and in the beginning of 1969, the now 32-year old challenger was ready for his second assault on the chess throne.

This time, Petrosian was unable to resist the onslaught, and Spassky became the tenth world champion.

The most pragmatic player since Lasker

"The chess throne was taken by the most realistic player since the time of Dr. Lasker," Mikhail Botvinnik said. "He has no particular preferences. It does not matter for Spassky whether he attacks or defends. He's strong in all types of positions; he has a solid understanding of strategy, but he is also good in calculating variations. Spassky is an extremely versatile, adaptable player."

Still, he was most dangerous in the middle game, and attack was his element. According to the words of his friend and colleague Alexander Nikitin on the occasion of Spassky's 70th birthday:

"In the period when he conquered Olympus, Spassky stood out with his phenomenal intuition, especially his ability to find the best possi-

bilities for attack. He learned this from Tolush, who was renowned for his purely intuitive offensive style."

"Tolush played the main part in my formation as a player," Spassky recalled later. "My style became aggressive, open on the whole front. I let loose my imagination, gambled with intuitive sacrifices, and I grew up as a tactician. My greatest asset began to shape up – a fine feeling for the oncoming crisis, which subsequently allowed me to become the strongest middle game player."

Experienced grandmaster and coach Igor Bondarevsky became Spassky's tutor after Alexander Tolush. Their collaboration lasted ten years. It further improved Spassky's psychological stability, which helped him a great deal in the struggle for the champion's title.

GM Alexander Kotov wrote: "Since Dr. Lasker, there has been no other player to use psychology as a weapon with such a success as Spassky."

The black sheep of totalitarian chess

Boris Spassky stood out ever since his youth with his independent behavior and non-conformity. He posed a real danger of becoming an example, an inspiration for others. The totalitarian authorities expended a lot of effort and resources to squelch his rebellious spirit; he bowed to no one, and often refused to take orders from his superiors.

"Boris was the black sheep of Soviet chess," Nikitin recalled.

Even during his years as a university student, he dared to read forbidden literature, and his views and opinions didn't quite fit in the totalitarian concepts. During the World Junior Championship in Antwerp in 1955, he asked his political "commissar" right out of the blue, "Is it true that comrade Lenin was suffering from a shameful disease?"

He soon had problems with Soviet officials' attitude toward "unstable elements," and attracted the attention of the KGB.

The outrage of totalitarian authorities came to its climax when Spassky refused to obey a direct order of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). When Fischer violated FIDE's regulations for the world title match in Reykjavik in 1972, Spassky was instructed to return to Moscow – but he did not.

That wasn't his last offense. After he lost the title, he made a second unprecedented transgression: he didn't deposit the money from the prize fund and television rights into the Soviet Sports Committee's account. That was what the rules demanded, and what all of his predecessors had done.

The sum he received was enormous for that time and he deposited it – into a Swiss bank account! With this stunning act of defiance,

he became the first Soviet grandmaster, and the first sportsman at all, who dared to deal a blow to the Soviet sports system's established financial regulations, and he undermined its foundations.

Sanctions came immediately after the disobedient grandmaster's return to Moscow. One of them was a half-year ban from participation in international tournaments.

In 1976, Spassky married Marina Stcherbatcheff, a secretary in the French embassy in Moscow. Their relationship had started a couple of years earlier, but the marriage permission was granted after a unique occasion: during an official reception of Brezhnev in honor of French president Pompidou's visit in Moscow, journalists hurled questions at the political leaders. Marina also got the floor:

"Mister Pompidou, what do you think of love?"

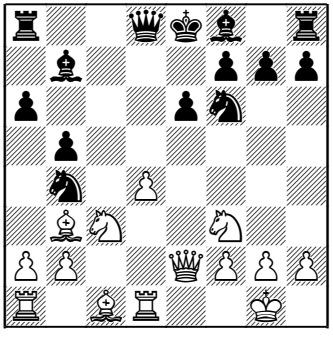
"Oh, there isn't anything more beautiful than love," replied the president.

"If that's so, why did they forbid me and Boris Spassky to marry each other?" she responded unexpectedly.

Brezhnev wormed out of the embarrassing situation with the explanation that there must have been a misunderstanding. And the following day, Boris and Marina's marriage was registered. They soon moved to France, where they live today.

Queen's Gambit Accepted
Spassky – Avtonomov
Leningrad 1949

1 d4 d5 2 c4 dxc4 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 e3 c5 5 ♗xc4 e6 6 0-0 a6 7 ♕e2 b5 8 ♗b3 ♘c6 9 ♘c3 cxd4 10 ♖d1 ♗b7 11 exd4 ♘b4



12 d5! ♘bxd5 13 ♗g5 ♗e7 14 ♗xf6 gxf6 15 ♘xd5 ♗xd5 16 ♗xd5 exd5 17 ♘d4 ♔f8 18 ♘f5 h5 19 ♖xd5! ♕xd5 20 ♕xe7+ ♔g8 21 ♕xf6 1-0