



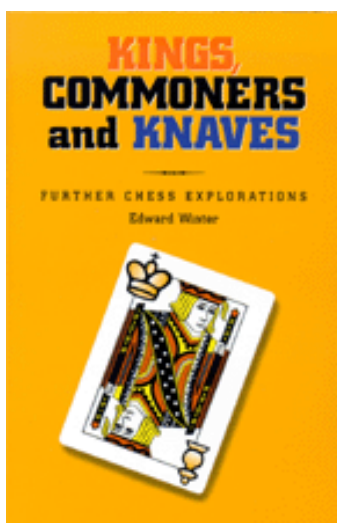
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From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



**Kings, Commoners and
Knaves**
by Edward Winter

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, **ChessCafe.com** has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online at least once each week, usually on Thursday or Friday. We will update the **ChessCafe** home page whenever there has been a "new" item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

An Interview with Sam Reshevsky Part I

Conducted by Hanon W. Russell

Since the mid-1930's, Grandmaster Sam Reshevsky (1911-1992) had been one of the America's greatest chessplayers, and, indeed one of the world's best. In his first international tournament, Margate 1935, he defeated the former world champion Jose Capablanca. In one of his last international tournaments, Moscow 1991, he defeated, among others, former world champion Vasily Smyslov.

We are pleased to present the complete text of an interview with Sam Reshevsky. The interview was conducted by Hanon Russell a few months before Reshevsky's 80th birthday in 1991. It was awarded the Chess Journalists of America's commendation for best interview of the year. Because of its length, we present it in two parts...

In December, 1989, I had the pleasure of accompanying Sam Reshevsky to the GMA qualifying tournament being held at Palma de Mallorca. Let me recount an anecdote which, in my opinion, is a good example of the way in which many regarded him there, i.e., with deference, almost awe. Our hotel was several hundred yards from the tournament hall. One evening, as we were walking to the hall to watch the conclusion of the adjourned games, a lanky, awkward looking young man was approaching us. Just before we passed each other, the

young man hesitated and quietly nodded at Reshevsky with an uncomfortable smile on his face, clearly waiting for some kind of acknowledgment. Reshevsky and I were talking and he saw none of this. The young man's eyes met mine, I smiled at him and shrugged, a gesture meaning, "Sorry, but I guess he didn't see or hear you." As soon as we had passed each other I said to Reshevsky, "Did you see that young man? I think he was trying to say hello to you."

"Oh, I guess I didn't," replied the grandmaster. "Who was it?"

"That was Boris Gelfand. He is leading the tournament and will probably win it," I said.

"Ah, Gelfand. He is a good player." And that was that. Two generations passing in the night.

Hanon W. Russell: You were born in Poland; whereabouts in Poland?

Sam Reshevsky: Ozorkov, about a mile from the second largest city in Poland, Lodz.

HWR: How large was your family?

SR: I was one of six children. I was the youngest of the boys.

HWR: When did you learn to play chess?

SR: When I was five years old.

HWR: How did you learn? Did your father teach you?

SR: Nobody taught me. My father used to play with his neighbors and after watching for about two weeks, I saw him resign. When he did that, I popped up and I said, "Dad, let me take over your position." He said, "OK." I took over the position and I won the game. That was the beginning.

HWR: How long was it before you or somebody realized you had a talent for the game?

SR: Well, they took me to the best players in the town and when I had no difficulty against them, they took me to the large city of Lodz. They took me to one of the best chess clubs there. I played against some of the best players and I did well.

HWR: A few years thereafter, though, your family made a decision to leave Poland.

SR: Well, not exactly for those reasons. They wanted me to be able to demonstrate my ability. So I gave a few exhibitions when I was older, six or seven years old, we toured Poland where I gave simultaneous exhibitions playing 20, 25 or 30 players at one time and then they took me to the other countries. It was not that they wanted to leave Poland, they wanted to go to the various countries in Europe and finally we went to the United States.

HWR: When you came to this country, you eventually settled in the Detroit area and you became friendly with a man named Julius Rosenwald. Do you remember Mr. Rosenwald?

SR: Oh yes. He was from Chicago. When I gave an exhibition in Chicago I was invited by Mr. Rosenwald to give an exhibition at his house. So I did, and I played against, I believe, Edward Lasker. He was so interested in me that he talked my parents into settling in Detroit. He told them I would get a normal education, which I did and we settled there.

HWR: You went to Detroit High School. How did you find it?

SR: Not bad at all. Actually I didn't go to public school. I had a private teacher for about six months and covered all the studies which were being taught in public school and then went right into high school.

HWR: From high school, you went to the University of Detroit. Did you do much playing?

SR: I played in the Western [Association] championships in vacation time, summertime. That was in the late 1920's; 1926 or 1927.

HWR: Were you receiving any recognition yet?

SR: I did quite well in these Western championships. I won a couple of them as I recall.

HWR: From high school, you first go to the University of Detroit and then the University of Chicago.

SR: Then I went to Chicago. We settled down in Chicago, my parents and I. I attended the University of Chicago in which I studied accountancy and graduated there after two years.

HWR: That's when you started playing a lot of chess regularly.

SR: After I graduated from the University of Chicago, I took off about six months and started studying chess theoretically and scientifically. The openings especially, of course.

HWR: What were you initially interested in when you looked at openings? What was influential on your study?

SR: I hadn't know anything before that time. I played by instinct. I always got myself into trouble in the openings because I didn't know them. I had to fight out of them. Then I made up my mind that I had to know the openings. I studied the openings thoroughly.

HWR: Did you study games or collections?

SR: Yes, those were the main things I studied. From magazines and from the

opening books available at that time.

HWR: The stars of the late 1920's and the early 1930's were Alekhine, Capablanca, Lasker...

SR: I didn't study them, just the openings.

HWR: Nothing else.

SR: Opening books, nothing else. I lost interest in everything else, really, because I depended on my ability to know the mid-game and the endings.

HWR: Did you get magazines like the *American Chess Bulletin*?

SR: Yes, that I did, I took magazines. I remember Helms quite well as a matter of fact.

HWR: At that point in your career, did you have a favorite player that you looked up to?

SR: Well, Alekhine, I always liked Alekhine, and also Capablanca.

HWR: You started playing in Western Association Tournaments. In 1931 you played in a tournament, I believe Sam Factor won it. 1932, you finished second at Minneapolis; Reuben Fine won. And then you were third in 1932 in Pasadena behind Dake and Steiner. How did the players like Dake, Steiner, Fine, treat you in the early 1930's? You were an up and coming young man...

SR: I don't think they liked the idea that I was in these tournaments, because I was a threat to them, and I was a youngster after all.

HWR: You had also had a lot of press as a boy prodigy.

SR: Yes.

HWR: Do you think they resented that?

SR: Possibly.

HWR: You played again in Detroit in 1933 in the Western Association tournament where Fine finished first, but you finished right behind him undefeated and you defeated him in your individual game I believe for the first time in your career. This was a game that was annotated in the October 1933 issue of *Chess Review*. You continued to play in national tournaments. But at some point you get the desire to play internationally.

SR: Yes, Margate 1935.

HWR: You finished undefeated, ahead of Capablanca and Thomas. How were treated when you returned to this country?

SR: I think first and foremost, I was treated with more respect. After all, I had defeated Capablanca and won the tournament.

HWR: Before 1936, how was your relationship with Frank Marshall? Had you met him?

SR: I had seen Frank Marshall, spent time with him, played clock games with him and challenged him for the U.S. Championship, but he wasn't interested. Somehow two clock games were arranged between him and me at his club, the Marshall Chess Club.

HWR: When was this?

SR: Well, you are testing my memory. Before I won the championship in 1936.

HWR: The last time he had defended his title was in 1923 in a match with Edward Lasker. He didn't play after that. Did you or other players resent the fact that he had the title but he wasn't putting it up?

SR: That's right. I resented it. I wanted to have a crack at it.

HWR: Did you think you deserved a crack at it?

SR: Well, after my result at Margate in 1935, yes.

HWR: How about before 1935?

SR: I didn't think about it much before then. I was anxious to test my ability in international events. But after Margate I was pretty confident in my ability to win the United States Championship.

HWR: Marshall gives up his title; he says he is not going to play anymore. A championship tournament is organized in 1936. Did you do anything special to prepare for that tournament?

SR: I just continued studying the openings as I did when I finished graduating from the University of Chicago.

HWR: Who did you think in 1936 was your biggest rival for the title?

SR: Fine. Reuben Fine.

HWR: Fine finished tied for third and fourth with Treysman and second was Simonson. You finished a half point ahead of him. After that, you play in one of the most famous tournaments of all time, Nottingham 1936. Tell me a little bit about that. In that tournament you defeated Bogolyubov, Alekhine, Lasker, Vidmar and you drew with Botvinnik. Tell me about your thoughts before you go to Nottingham.

SR: Well, I was anxious to play in it. I wanted to find out something about my real talent and also if I had any prospects of playing for the world championship. So, that was something that I was really looking forward to and how I would do against these players, some of the best players in the world.

HWR: Before you went, did you have any idea about what would have been a satisfactory result for you?

SR: I thought third place would be a good showing in that kind of an event, considering the strength.

HWR: In fact, you did finish tied for third, fourth and fifth with Fine and Alekhine, a half point behind Capablanca and Botvinnik. Now, 1937 was a busy year for you. You played for the Marshall Club, you went to Stockholm, the Olympiad. You had a very good result at Kemeru, and you had a decent result at Semmering. First tell me about the Marshall Club. By 1937, you are a power in American chess. You didn't have a problem playing for the Marshall?

SR: No.

HWR: Did you visit there often?

SR: At that time, yes.

HWR: Were you a member or did you just play for the team?

SR: I was an honorary member right from the start.

HWR: How about the Manhattan Chess Club?

SR: The same thing.

HWR: When the Marshall played the Manhattan, for whom did you play?

SR: The Marshall.

HWR: You finished tied with Flohr and Petrov at Kemeru. You defeated Fine again and you defeated Keres. It's right about this time in your career that people have said, in retrospect, that either you, Keres, Botvinnik or Fine could have defeated Alekhine had you been given the opportunity. What do you think about that?

SR: I think it's right. I think we had a good chance, but he would not give us the chance.

HWR: Do you think after the AVRO tournament, if Botvinnik had played Alekhine, he could have defeated him in a match?

SR: I don't think so. Alekhine was still too strong at that time. Especially if he was not drinking.

HWR: How about Keres. Do you think in 1938-1940, Keres could have defeated Alekhine?

SR: No.

HWR: Why not?

SR: I don't think he was strong enough.

HWR: Botvinnik has said in his autobiography that he never thought that Keres had what it took to become world champion.

SR: I would agree with him.

HWR: What do you think Keres lacked to become world champion?

SR: He was not a great fighter. He was a very strong player, but he was not a great fighter.

HWR: But he was famous for some of his attacking games.

SR: Yes, that is true, but taken alone, that is not sufficient. His strength lay in attacking, but I don't think he was as strong as some of the other players positionally.

HWR: You have just told me that in the 1938-1940 period, you don't think either Botvinnik or Keres could have defeated Alekhine for the title. How about Fine?

SR: Certainly not.

HWR: Why not?

SR: Fine was a fine player, but he was not in the same class with Alekhine.

HWR: That leaves you. And if you played Alekhine in the 1938-1940 period?

SR: I think at that time I might have had a chance.

HWR: What could you do differently that Botvinnik, Keres or Fine could not?

SR: It was not a question of what we did, it was a question of the type of fighter one was. I think I was very strong in that area. I gave it my all when I played in a tournament. I did not think they did.

HWR: Well, you have always had the reputation of a fighter. There came a time of course, when the war intervened. There were two very interesting tournaments, however. In 1938 you beat Fine by a half point in the U.S. Championship and then two years later you did the same thing to him. In fact, in the last round, you played the black side of a Two Knights Defense, you get a losing position, but you fight back and draw the game. It is the second time in a row you have defeated him for the title, both times by a half point. There are some people who say that that broke Fine's spirit, those two tournaments where he did so well but still did not beat you. What do you have to say about that?

SR: I think that Fine was at a disadvantage when he played against me. Somehow, I don't think he had the confidence he needed to play against me.

HWR: Do you think he played against others with more confidence?

SR: Yes. You know, my record against him is an indication that he didn't have the confidence that was necessary to have a better score against me.

HWR: His one outstanding tournament was AVRO 1938. It is a very strong tournament and he takes first place. You were tied for fourth through sixth.

SR: I am not trying to take anything away from Fine. He was a great player, but it is steadiness that counts. I think he lacked that.

HWR: 1948 sees the publication of your first book, *Reshevsky on Chess*. Tell me how that came about. Did you write it with someone, who was the publisher.

SR: That was written 100% by myself. Yes, I believe McKay published it.

HWR: How long did that take you to write?

SR: I would say it took me about eight months or so. On and off.

HWR: That was also the year [1948] of the world championship tournament. Alekhine had died in 1946 in Portugal. Botvinnik won, and along with you, Keres, Smyslov and Euwe played. There were five games against each. What did you do to prepare, now that you had a direct shot at the title?

SR: The openings were the only thing I ever prepared.

HWR: You didn't spend any time on the endgame?

SR: No.

HWR: You didn't spend any time on the middlegame?

SR: No. I just spent time on the openings because I was confident that I could handle the rest of the game myself.

HWR: Did you play any training matches?

SR: No.

HWR: What did you feel your chances were going into that tournament?

SR: I didn't know because there was a question of how the Russians were going to play against each other.

HWR: Even then?

SR: Even then. There was this rumor, unconfirmed, that the Russian threw games to each other, if necessary.

HWR: Do you think that happened in 1948?

SR: I had a suspicion that it might have.

HWR: But Botvinnik won that tournament going away.

SR: Yes, I know, but I had my doubts.

HWR: Fine decided not to play in that tournament. Some people say that by that time he had lost interest in world class chess. Do you think that was true?

SR: Yes.

HWR: Who did you think the favorite was to win that tournament? Did you think it was Botvinnik?

SR: It could have been any of the Russians.

HWR: In 1950 there was a World Challengers Tournament in Budapest and you couldn't get to go to that. You had a fight with the State Department. Reports had it that they would not give you a visa to go. What was that all about?

SR: I didn't play because I didn't want to go to Budapest.

HWR: That was your decision?

SR: Yes, mine.

HWR: I read the reports in *Chess Review* that you wanted to go but they wouldn't let you.

SR: No, I didn't want to go. I didn't have any problem with the State Department.

HWR: In 1951, for the first time in a U.S. Championship in which you were playing, you don't win. An upstart named Larry Evans wins the tournament. Was that a surprise to you when that happened.

SR: I knew Evans was a strong, upcoming player.

[End, Part 1]

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