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A Conversation with a Legend

Gabriel Velasco

Former world chess champion Boris Spassky, now a French citizen, recently spent a few days in Mexico City, where he was invited to attend a massive simultaneous display of nearly 12,000 boards, run by 500 local first-category and master-level players, in downtown Mexico City on the morning of Sunday October 22nd. The following day, Spassky and his companions (the well-known author Alexander Roshal and his wife, as well as Spassky's son) dropped casually into a coffee shop where local chess players usually meet, and I was fortunate to be there together



with a couple of chess-playing friends. We all ended up sharing two tables and spent a very enjoyable time listening to Spassky, who was in a particularly good mood. The former world chess champion asked for a chess set and board while he enjoyed a piece of chocolate cake and several cups of good coffee. It is a pity that I did not have a means to record that conversation, which lasted about three hours. Spassky answered all sorts of questions and showed us several interesting positions, either

from his own games, or chess studies that he recalled.

I will try to summarize the most interesting things that the legendary world chess champion told his improvised audience.

Spassky said that he considered Capablanca, Alekhine, Fischer, Karpov and Kasparov the five greatest players of all time. I asked him if he would also include Emanuel Lasker on the list of the greatest players, but Spassky said he would definitely not.



When the conversation dwelled on Viktor Kortchnoi, Spassky casually remembered that during the hard-fought match both grandmasters contested in Belgrade 1978, he had felt sure that Kortchnoi was attempting to hypnotize him either by electronic or chemical means, because he felt rather dizzy or indisposed when he sat in front of Kortchnoi, but as soon as he rose from the table and strolled elsewhere, the malaise suddenly disappeared. According to Spassky, that is why he decided to analyze the games far away, at the spectators' demonstration chessboard, something that got Kortchnoi very upset. He now believes that it was under his wrist watch that Kortchnoi was hiding a device aimed at disturbing him.



When somebody asked him if the toughest opponent he'd had in his whole life was either Kortchnoi or Bobby Fischer, surprisingly Spassky said that neither of them had been the toughest, but Anatoly Karpov probably was. As far as Garry Kasparov is concerned, Boris said he had played very few games against him, so it was not easy for him to assess his real strength. Spassky said that he was in top form when he lost a candidates match to Karpov in 1974. He said that during the years 1973 and 1974 he had recovered his old top form of the sixties, but when he played Bobby Fischer in Reykjavík 1972, he was in poor form from the psychological viewpoint. Somehow he considers that Karpov in 1974 was a tougher opponent than Bobby Fischer in 1972, but he is not quite sure. At any rate he insisted that Karpov was the toughest opponent he had ever met.

When asked why he was in poor psychological form during the Reykjavík match in 1972, Spassky said that it was on account of his off-the-board fight against Russian authorities, who were trying to impose on him all sorts of conditions, many of which he thought to be absurd. Spassky said that his off-board battle against Moscow had left him psychologically exhausted. He said he felt very upset and tired right before and during the first half of the Reykjavík match, and that put him very far from his top form. In addition, said Spassky, his appointed trainer the late Grandmaster Efim Geller, was only interested in analyzing opening variations of his (Geller's) own interest, and right from the beginning of the match his relationship with Geller went from bad to worse, which also had an influence in the outcome of the match. However, he said that Bobby played extraordinary chess, and that was naturally the deciding factor.



When asked if he still kept in touch with Bobby Fischer, Spassky said that he had lost track of the American grandmaster, and didn't even know his whereabouts. Boris insisted that Robert Fischer had been a great champion who had not been thoroughly understood by people; and he said that Fischer has always been a man of principles who strove in vain in an attempt to raise chess above the petty corruption of FIDE and the Russian Federation. He added that in his opinion Fischer was the ideal world champion, whereas Kasparov had done much harm to chess with his selfish attitude.

Spassky said he considered the late Russian GM Igor Bondarevsky as the best trainer and coach he ever had. According to Boris, grandmaster Bondarevsky helped him develop a great strength in the middle game, because he did not place too much emphasis on opening variations, but rather on middle game and endgame planning. Bondarevsky's typical training session, according to Spassky, started with some very interesting middle game positions that he was requested to solve with a clock and without moving the chessmen. He recalled a very subtle position he had solved as a young master, after a lengthy reflection. On seeing that Spassky had solved the position without moving the pieces, Bondarevsky assured him that he would go far. "Some day you will probably become a world champion," said the late grandmaster.



Somebody asked him about the possible outcome of the 1975 match between Fischer and Karpov, a match that never took place. Surprisingly, Spassky said he did not consider it clear that Bobby Fischer might have won, because in 1975 Bobby had already been inactive for three years, and such a handicap would not possibly be overcome even by a chess genius. Under such conditions, Spassky believes that Karpov would have been the favorite. Somebody told Spassky that Kortchnoi did not share such an opinion, but Boris just smiled.



Speaking about Viktor Kortchnoi, Spassky said that all matches he had played against Kortchnoi had been very bitterly fought. He said that Kortchnoi has always had a gift of taking immediate advantage of any imprecision, however slight, made by his opponent. When I asked him if he considered Kortchnoi the best endgame player of all time, at least as far as rook endings are concerned, Spassky said he did not at all agree with that view, and that in his opinion Kortchnoi's strength was of a different sort.

When asked whether he still considered the Marshall counterattack a sound weapon for Black against the Ruy Lopez. Spassky said he did; and added that the Marshall hadn't yet been refuted "It probably leads to a draw," he said. When asked why he had not played the Marshall in his 1992 match vs. Fischer in Sveti Stefan, Spassky just shrugged his shoulders. He said that in some games of the 1992 match, Fischer had played just like in his good old days and that had made him (Spassky) very happy.

When the conversation dwelled on the 1970 USSR vs. the Rest of the World Match in Yugoslavia I asked him if it was true that he had spent about 40 minutes pondering his fantastic combination against Bent Larsen. Spassky said that it wasn't true, that it had just taken him a few minutes, and that the whole game had lasted scarcely half an hour.

Regarding the match between Kramnik and Kasparov, Spassky said he was glad to see that finally somebody had hit the nail on the head and found the correct way to play against Kasparov. He said that in his opinion, Vladimir Kramnik was using the same approach used by Botvinnik against Mikhail Tal in the 1961 revenge match, namely to avoid giving his opponent many chances for active play with the initiative.

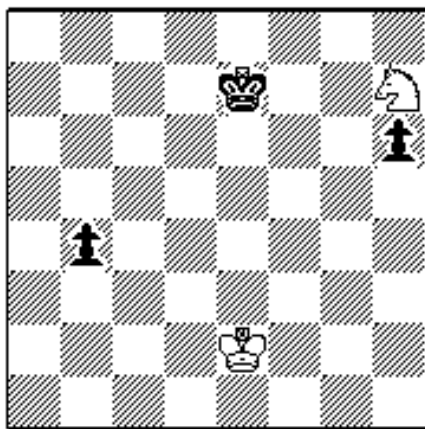


Spassky said he considered himself a happy man. He said he had no further ambitions. He made everyone laugh several times, like when FM Florentino Garméndiz approached him and challenged him to a blitz match for a stake. Spassky said he did not feel like playing blitz and declined the challenge; then Garméndiz, apparently not satisfied with that, insisted and said he had beaten some masters in the U.S. and won such and such (minor) tournaments in Tijuana or thereabouts. Spassky then raised his hands as though he had been scared, and said: "Oh you did. That really frightens me; I'm utterly scared now!". Everybody laughed.

Boris has a fine spontaneous sense of humor. He made everyone laugh when he imitated Karpov and Kasparov.

It is evident that Boris has a particular delight with subtle composed studies. He

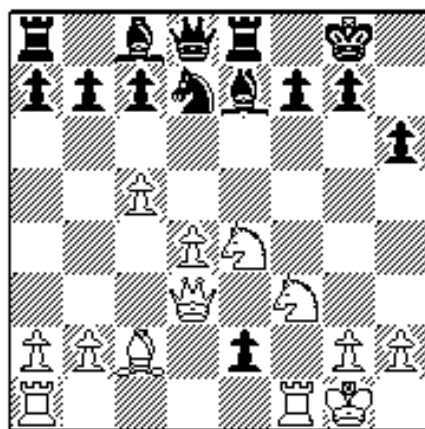
asked for a chess set and board and showed us the following interesting ending (See Diagram):



White to play and draw. After everybody gave up, Spassky showed us the solution: **1. Kd3 Kf7 2. Kc4 Kg6!** (if 2...Kg7, then 3. Kxb4, Kxh7; 4. Kc4 and White's king manages to stop the pawn on time. Nevertheless, if now 3. Kxb4, there would follow 3...h5! 4. Nf8+ Kf5, and the knight would not be able to do anything to prevent Black's pawn from queening) **3. Nf8+ Kf5 4. Nd7 h5** (or else 4...b3, 5. Kc3!) **5. Nc5!!** (the key: White's knight is heading toward f1. In case of 5. Nb6? h4 6. Nd5 Ke4!, Black's h pawn would promote) **5...h4 6. Nb3!!** (but not 6. Nd3?, h3 7. Nf2 h2 8.Kxb4 Kf4 9. Kc4 Kf3 10. Nh1 Kg2 11. Kd3 Kxh1 and Black wins) **6...h3 7. Nd2 h2 8. Nf1+! h1(Q) 9.Ng3+** and it's a draw. It is a study composed by N. Grigoriev in 1934.

Spassky also showed us and analyzed, on request, the critical position of his first game with Bobby Fischer in Mar del Plata 1960. He also showed us his game vs. David Bronstein from the Soviet Championship of 1960. Incidentally, that game was used in famous a James Bond film with Sean Connery ("From Russia with Love"), where it was supposed to have been a deciding game for the World Championship between "Kronsteen" and "MacAdams", two characters created by Ian Fleming.

Spassky– Bronstein, USSR Championship 1960. 1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Nf3 d5 4. exd5 Bd6 5. Nc3 Ne7 6. d4 0– 0 7. Bd3 Nd7 8. 0– 0 h6 (8...Ng6) 9. Ne4 Nxd5 10. c4 Ne3 11. Bxe3 fxe3 12. c5 Be7 13. Bc2 Re8 14. Qd3! e2!? (trying to decoy the queen from a dangerous diagonal. The alternative was 14...Nf8; See Diagram)



15. Nd6! Nf8 (a complicated game would ensue after 15...exf1=Q+ but, according to Spassky, the text move was "typical Bronstein") **16. Nxf7!! exf1=Q+ 17. Rxf1 Bf5** (compulsory, due to the numerous threats) **18. Qxf5 Qd7 19. Qf4 Bf6 20. N3e5 Qe7 21. Bb3! Bxe5 22. Nxe5 + Kh7 23. Qe4+ 1– 0** (If 23...Kh8; 24. Rxf8+! Qxf8 25. Ng6+ and mate in two).

Unfortunately, after about three hours I had to take my leave in order to attend my duties. Spassky recalled that back in 1979 I had

given him a copy of my first collection of Carlos Torre's games, but that material was in Spanish and in descriptive notation. Boris said he still kept that material, but confessed that he couldn't understand it on account of the notation. I said to him that it had just been released in English and in algebraic notation. Since Boris said he was really interested in the games of Carlos Torre, I promised to send a copy to him.

Spassky left a very positive impression on all us. On the face of it he is a very happy man, who fully enjoys life and is satisfied with what he has done. His conversation is rather enjoyable and his sense of humor is excellent. I consider myself really lucky to have had such a chance to spend several hours with a living legend.

The Chess Café extends its thanks to Taylor Kingston for his assistance in the preparation of this article.



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