

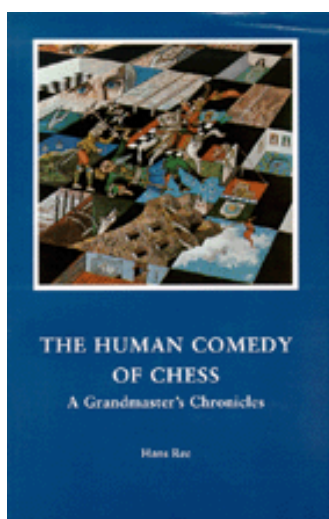


C O L U M N I S T S

## Dutch Treat

### Hans Ree

#### *The Human Comedy of Chess*



by Hans Ree

## Ostap Bender's Legacy

In the center of the Kalmykian capital Elista stands the monument to Ostap Bender, the main character of the book *The Twelve Stairs* by the Russian duo Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov. Already the first sentence makes it clear that this is a fine book: “In the provincial town N. there were so many hairdressers and undertakers that it seemed as if its citizens came only into the world to be cut, washed and shaved and, sprinkled with a fresh lotion, to pass away immediately afterwards.” I hope my re-translation of a Dutch translation has kept some of the original charm.

The book appeared in 1928 in Moscow, but Communist authorities play almost no role in it. Apparently at that time, and even in 1931 when the sequel *The Golden Calf* appeared, it was still possible to publish a picaresque novel in which the existence of the Communist government was practically ignored.

Ostap Bender, who calls himself “the great combinator” is a con man, a thief and a blackmailer. In Russia he has become one of the most famous fictional characters and many of his sayings have become current expressions there.

During one of his adventurous trips Bender comes to the town Vashuki, where as “Grandmaster O. Bender” he will give a lecture about “fruitful opening play,” followed by a simul on 160 boards.

Before his exhibition Bender had already visited the leaders of the chess section of the town, to whom he unfolded a breath-taking vision of a golden future for Vashuki chess.

By organising a big international chess tournament with stars like Lasker and Capablanca, the sleepy little town Vashuki would become the center of Russia, of the world and even of the solar system, because the technological progress that would automatically proceed from the organisation of such a super event, would make interplanetary travel as common as a trip by train. Vashuki, which would be called New Moscow by then, might become the venue of the first interplanetary chess congress.

As to the costs of the organisation, Bender only asked for a small advance to pay for the telegrams, which was duly given by the dumbfounded men of the chess section.

As Bender had played chess only once in his life, his lecture about opening play

had to be brief. In his simul the “grandmaster” blundered pieces on all boards and it became clear that he didn't really know how the knight moved. He had to flee, knowing that his accomplice had already taking care of the entry fees, and with great effort and daring he managed to escape from the pursuit by the furious Vashuki chessplayers.

It stands to reason that for Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who established the Bender monument, this clever rogue has been a source of inspiration. During the World Championship match it became clear that there is one other heavyweight in chess politics who likes to identify with Ostap Bender: Topalov's manager Silvio Danailov.

Apparently in two Bulgarian newspapers a picture was printed of Danailov, standing happily smiling next to the Bender monument. Don't say that the Bender monument is a common photo opportunity for tourists in Elista. These pictures of Danailov seem a proud demonstration, published at a time when his shameful actions seemed to have secured the world championship for Topalov.

In most parts of the world Danailov's reputation has become pitch black, but in Bulgaria this may be different. As a smart cookie who in a Russian province managed to get the better of the Russian Kramnik, at least for a while, he may have become quite popular.

When Kramnik did not turn up for the fifth game, I thought the match was over. Kramnik had had no choice, I thought. Trivial as the matter of a private toilet may seem – though personally I do not think it's a trivial matter – Danailov had created a situation where his message was clear to all the media in the world, though he had been careful not to state it explicitly: Kramnik had won two games when he had his toilet in which to hide a small computer. But now that his opportunities to cheat were taken away, let's see what he can do on his own.

This message was very powerful. In my neighborhood cafe I found that almost everyone who followed the chess news took the possibility of computer cheating by Kramnik quite seriously. They had all seen the famous restaurant toilet scene near the end of the movie *The Godfather I*, so the idea of a device, either a gun or a pocket-Fritz being hidden there, was quite familiar to them.

So Kramnik, if he would have turned up for the fifth game, would have been in a situation where he would have had to play well to show that he had not been a crook. If, after having no access to his private toilet, he had started to lose, the mainstream media and the general public would have considered him a cheater. Everybody would remember Al Pacino getting the gun in the toilet.

Against a tsunami of world-wide bad publicity nothing can be done, nor can it be rectified later. Confronted with the possible ruin of his reputation as a decent person, Kramnik could only preempt it by giving up a point in the match.

Who would have been to blame, had the match been aborted after only four games, which seemed quite likely at the time? No lack of suspects. Topalov's team, the

Appeals Committee, the chief arbiter and the organising committee, they all played a bad role, some actively making mischief, others innocently looking the other way when a firm stand would have been honorable.

But of course at the Elista match there was only one person in charge, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. The other officials were doing the things they thought he wanted them to do, which was not always easy to find out. No wonder that our Geurt's blood pressure rose to 220.

There is a tendency among subjects of ruthless dictators never to blame the man in chief himself. "If only our leader knew what is being done in his name..." But of course he knows and every once in a while the leader will arrange a purge to eliminate the scapegoats and introduce others who will serve as scapegoats for the years to come.

This we may see in the chess world in the next months. It is whispered that Makropoulos and Azmaiparashvili will be out of grace and that Bessel Kok will be in. If so, my advice to Kok, a good and decent man, would be a loud scream: "Don't even think about it!"

Going back to the World Championship tournament in San Luis in 2005, we find another suspect who we can blame for the recent near-disaster: Alexander Morozevich. He suggested that Topalov had become World Champion with computer help, but at the time he didn't bring it out officially into the open. Later, when votes for the chess Oscar were collected, Morozevich's line-up was as original as his chess style: 1. Rybka 2. Hydra 3. Danailov.

Hydra is the computer that routed Michael Adams. Rybka is the computer that was supposed to have won the World Championship for Topalov and Danailov the man who made it possible, all according to Morozevich of course.

Later several other Russians took up this theme, among them Sergei Dolmatov, who used to work together with Kramnik quite often. One can imagine that both Topalov and Danailov were extremely angry about these accusations. And so they hit back in Elista.

It is extremely unlikely that they really believed that Kramnik was cheating. They may not even have expected that their protest would be taken seriously. Topalov and Danailov may have been as surprised as everybody else when the Appeals Committee granted their idiotic demand that Kramnik's toilet would be closed. When their silly joke had gone far out of hand, they had to stick to their role. But there is no reason to pity them, for it almost made them win the match.

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