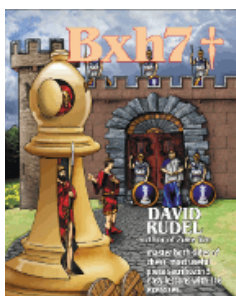




COLUMNISTS

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"Suspicious Character": Vladimir Sournin (1875-1942)

We first wrote about Vladimir Sournin in an essay for *The Campbell Report* back in 2006. Sournin's chess activities in New York, Washington, and in some American tournaments of the 1920s warranted a closer look. While we managed to map his whereabouts in chess along with some basic biographical details, we found little about the man himself. This changed in the last couple of months when we contacted Dale Dulaney, assistant archivist of the The Library of Virginia. Dulaney made an interesting discovery related to Sournin, and he published an essay on these findings in *Recordatur* (Fall 2009, Vol. 13, No. 2), a publication of the Library of Virginia. Before we make room in this month's column for his essay, a few chess facts about Sournin would doubtlessly be useful.

Aspiring Chess Player and War Veteran

According to Jeremy Gaige's *Chess Personalia*, Vladimir Sournin was born on August 1, 1875 in Mstislavl, Russia. His earlier moments with the game of chess were recounted by a chess column in the September 1, 1901 issue of the *Washington Post*: "When but a child Mr. Sournin watched the game of Caissa as fought by some of the greatest players of the world. At St. Petersburg he made acquaintance of Lasker, and in a way he might be called a student of that celebrity." According to the same source, during one of his visits to Paris in late 1890s, Sournin met Emanuel Schiffers and became his protégé. The December 24, 1905 *Washington Times* noted that "as a favorite pupil of the Russian chess master Tarrasch for several years [Sournin] held the chess honors of St. Petersburg." Caution is necessary with such stories; though they were probably told by Sournin himself once he arrived in America.

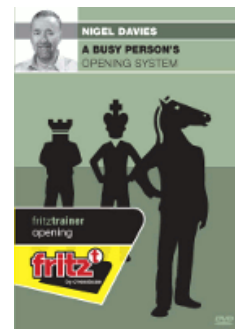


Vladimir Sournin
[Courtesy of the The Library of Virginia]

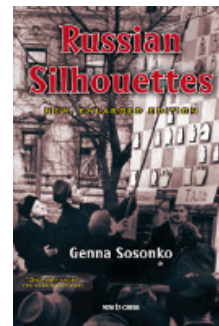
It was also noted that while in Paris, Sournin learned about the Spanish-American war preparations. He volunteered to fight the war on the American side. In 1897 he was in New York. Various newspaper accounts indicate he was an active player in the rooms of the Manhattan and Brooklyn Chess Clubs being known as a "young Russian expert." As shown by John S. Hilbert's *Young Marshall* (Olomouc: Moravian Chess, 2002), Sournin lost a match -7 +2=2 to Frank J. Marshall in the spring of that year.

In 1898, Sournin fought in the Spanish-American war in Puerto Rico. As he probably told his fellow Washington-based chess players later on and as

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by Mikhail Botvinnik

recorded in the chess column of the *Washington Post*, "His comrades in arms tell how at odd moments, he would draw lines on his tent floor and enjoy a little analysis with imaginary pieces and pawns. This novel form of solitaire, or the visit to the land of Capablanca, must have been given him a bit of master touch, for when he next appeared in Washington he was nigh unbeatable." After he was discharged in June 1899, he was in Washington where he joined the Washington Chess Club and emerged as the leading player in Washington, D.C. area. It seems that Sournin remained connected to the Department of War as a topographic draftsman.

NAME OF SOLDIER:	Sournin, Vladimir			
SERVICE:	Late rank <i>Transferred</i> Co. D. 4 Regt U.S. Vol. Inf.			
TERM OF SERVICE:	Discharged <i>1899</i>			
DATE OF FILING.	CLASS.	APPLICATION NO.	LAW	CERTIFICATE NO.
1423 Apr. 7.	Invalid,	482218	3/20	1228965
	Widow,			
	Minor,			
ADDITIONAL SERVICES:	K 4 U.S. Vol. Inf.			
REMARKS:	War with Spain			
	Died 1 at			

Sournin's War Veteran Pension Application

[Source: Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans Who Served Between 1861 and 1900 – [The National Archives](#)]

[Click here to enlarge image](#)

When Harry N. Pillsbury gave a sixteen-board blindfold exhibition [Pillsbury playing checkers at four boards] at the club on October 10, 1900, Sournin was present. He managed to get a draw according to the *Washington Post* of October 11. When Pillsbury visited again the club in mid-November 1903 for another simultaneous exhibition, Sournin was again present. This time an exhibition game was arranged between the two men. The score of the game, won by Sournin, appears in Jacques N. Pope's [Harry Nelson Pillsbury, American Chess Champion](#) (Ann Arbor: Pawn Island Press, 1996) and was found in *The Illustrated London News* of January 2, 1904:

Harry Nelson Pillsbury - Vladimir Sournin

Washington, Exhibition Game

November 14, 1903

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Bc5 4.c3 Nf6 5.0-0 Nxe4 6.d4 exd4 7.cxd4 Be7 8.d5 Nb8 9.Qd4 Nf6



10.d6? Bxd6 11.Re1+ Be7 12.Qe3 c6 13.Ba4 Nd5 14.Qe2 0-0 15.Nc3 Nxc3 16.bxc3 Bf6 17.Ba3 d5 18.Bxf8 Qxf8 19.Qd3 Na6 20.Bc2 g6 21.Rad1 Nc5 22.Qe3 Ne6 23.h3 b6 24.Ne5 Bb7 25.f4 Qc5 26.Qxc5 Nxc5 27.Re3 Kf8 28.f5 Re8 29.Rde1 Kg7 30.fxg6 hxg6 31.g4 Ne6 32.Nd7 Be7 33.Kh2 Rd8 34.Ne5 Bd6 35.Kg2 c5! 36.Kf2 c4? 37.Rf3? Ng5 38.Rfe3 Bc5 0-1 [Illustrated London News, January 2, 1904]

In the fall of 1903, Sournin won a match from Albert B. Fox, the young rising

18.e4 dxe3 19.Bxe3 Nxe3 20.fxe3 Kb7 21.e4 Rxe5 22.Rf3 Qb6+ 23.Kg2
Rb5 24.b3 Rd8 25.Rd3 Rf8 26.Rc3 c5 27.Rxc5 Rxc5 28.Qxc5 Qxc5 29.
Rxc5 Kb6 30.b4 Rd8 31.a4 Rd4 32.Rb5+ Kc6 33.Kf3 a6 34.Rb8 a5 35.
bxa5 Rxa4 36.Rg8 Rxa5 37.Rxg7 h5 38.g4 hxg4+ 39.Kxg4 Ra2 40.Kg3
Kd6 41.h4 Ra1 42.e5+ Kxe5 43.Rxc7 Rg1+ 44.Kf3 Rh1 45.h5 Kf6 46.Rc5
e4 47.h6 Kf5 Ra8 Rc6 e4+ 49.Kg2 Rh4 50.Kg3 Rh1 51.Rc5+ Kg6 52.Kf4
Rh4+ 53.Kc3 $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ [*Lasker's Chess Magazine*, April 1906, pages 262-263].

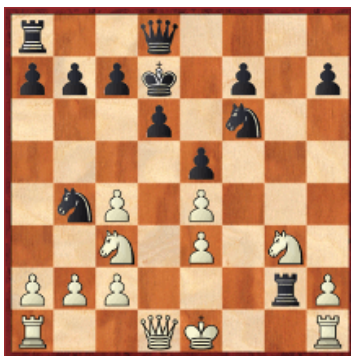
Sournin did some work for the Chief of Engineers Office (War Department) and specialized in topographical and hydrographical map-making. This seems to have required a fair amount of travelling in areas such as Panama Canal. Whenever he was back to Washington, he frequented the rooms of the chess club. During a simultaneous exhibition given by Emanuel Lasker in 1910, Sournin won a game from his more prestigious opponent:

Emanuel Lasker – Vladimir Sournin

Washington, Simultaneous

Exhibition, March 1910

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Bc5 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 d6 5.Be3 Bb6 6.Nge2 Nc6 7.Ng3 Be6 8.Nh5 Bxc4 9.Nxg7+ Kd7 10.dxc4 Bxe3 11.fxex3 Rg8 12.Nf5 Rxg2 13.Ng3 Nb4



14.Nce2? Ng4 15.Kd2 Qg5 16.Kc1 Qxe3+ 17.Kb1 Nf2 18.Qf1 Qd2 19.Qc1 Qxc1+ 20.Rxc1 Nxe4 21.Nxe4 Rxe2 22.Nf6+ Ke7 23.Nxh7 Rxh2 24.Ng5 Rg8 25.Nf3 Rf2 26.Ne1 Rg1 27.b3 Rxe1 0-1 [*American Chess Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 6, June 1910, page 140]

Between 1910 and 1912, Sournin was out of the United States travelling through Europe. He ended up in Russia, most likely caught up in the turmoil of the pre-war years. More information on Sournin's war-time years in Russia can be found below in Dulaney's essay. When he returned from Russia he reached Charleston, South Carolina. When he finally returned to Washington in early 1918, the chess column of the *Washington Post* of March 13 announced: "The return to Washington of Vladimir Sournin, as announced in this column two weeks ago, has suddenly revived interest in the individual chess championship of District and has given a strong impetus for an annual tourney to decide the title (...). That Sournin is an important factor in any speculation on this subject goes without saying to those who know his past record here and elsewhere." Thus, Sournin was back duelling with his leading rival: Walker. The following game was printed in the June 29, 1919 issue of the *Washington Post*:

Vladimir Sournin – Frank B. Walker

D.C. Championship, June 1919

1.e4 exd5 2.Nf6 3.d4 Nxd5 4.c4 Nb6 5.Nc3 e5 6.d5 c6 7.Nf3 Bb4 8.Be3 Bg4 9.Qb3 Bxc3+ 10.Qxc3 f6 11.d6 N8d7 12.Bd3 O-O 13.Qc2 f5 14.h3 Bxf3 15.gxf3 Qf6 16.O-O-O Kh8 17.Rhg1 f4 18.Bd2 g6 19.Bc3 Rae8 20.b4 c5 21.b5 Re6 22.Rg4 Rxd6 23.Rdg1 Rg8 24.h4 Nf8 25.Rg5 Nbd7 26.Qe2 Re6 27.Qe4 b6 28.R5g4 Rg7 29.Qa8 Qe7 30.Bf5 Rd6 31.Bxd7 Rxd7 32.Re1 Rd8 33.Qe4 Nd7 34.Rxf4 Re8 35.Qb7 Kg8 36.Rfe4 Rf7 37.Qd5 Nf6 38.Qxe5 Qxe5 39.Rxe5 Rxe5 40.Rxe5 Nd7 41.Re3 Kf8 42.Rd3 Ke8 43.Re3+ Kd8 44.Bd2 Kc7 45.Ra3 Kb7 46.f4 Nf6 47.Re3 Ng4 48.Re2 Nh6 49.Re1 Nf5 50.Rh1 Nd6 51.Kc2 Nxc4 52.Bc1 Nd6 53.a4 Nf5 54.h5 gxh5 55.Rxh5 Nd4+ 56.Kd3 Kc7 57.Be3 Nf5 58.Ke4 Nd6+ 59.Ke5 Kd7 60.f5 Nc4+ 61.Kd5 Nd6 62.f6 Rxf6 63.Rxh7+ Nf7 64.Rg7 1-0



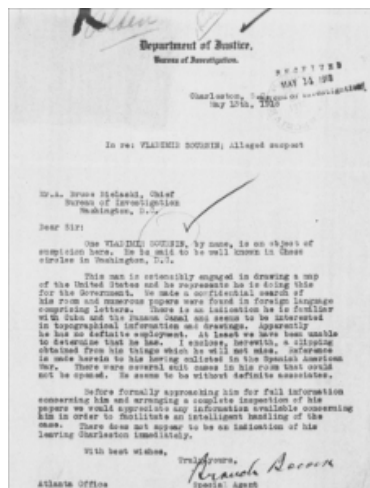
Here White claimed the game because Black exceeded his time.

There was some history between the two players as revealed by the columnist of the *Post* on July 6, 1919:

The players were Sournin and Walker, old rivals. Walker failed to start his opponent's clock, but left his own running, and after taking about 25 or 30 minutes, Walker's time meanwhile having been exhausted, Sournin claimed the game according to the rules governing the tourney. In a game played for the District Championship between the same parties played recently in getting ready to seal his move before adjournment Walker took plenty of time, unconscious of his clock, and having exceeded the time limit by two minutes Sournin claimed the game. He was within his rights in both cases. Walker recalls that in 1902 in the eleventh game of their District Championship, when the score stood Walker 4, Sournin 3, drawn 3, and he needed one game to win the match, Sournin with two or three moves to make in about one and a half minutes failed to adjust the clocks and all Walker had to do was to study the position until his opponent's time was exhausted and then claim the game. He called his opponent's attention to the clock, and subsequently lost the game and the match.

"Suspicious Character"

That the tension between Sournin and Walker was beyond chess is proven by some documents found in the Bureau of Investigation Case Files 1908-1922. These case files, today made available online through various specific content providers, cover important investigations by the Bureau of Investigation, an agency of the U.S. government later known as the FBI. Agents investigated espionage, sabotage, and other war-time threats. The Old German Files (1909-1921), more than 400,000 records held at the U.S. National Archives within which the Sournin-related documents can be found, were investigative records done before and after World War I.



Page from the Bureau of Investigation report on Sournin, May 1918
[FBI Case Files]

[Click here to enlarge image](#)

Immediately after the war, Sournin, like thousands of others foreign nationals on American soil, was considered a "suspicious character." On May 13, 1918, a special agent filed the following report:

Charleston
May 13th, 1918

In re: Vladimir Sournin; Alleged suspect

Mr. A. Bruce Bielaski, Chief
Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

One Vladimir Sournin, by name, is an object of suspicion here. He is said to be well known in Chess circles in Washington, D. C.

This man is ostensibly engaged in drawing a map of the United States and he represents he is doing this for the Government. We made a confidential search of his room and numerous papers were found in foreign language comprising letters. There is an indication he is familiar with Cuba and the Panama Canal and seems to be interested in topographical information and drawings. Apparently he had no definite employment. At least we have been unable to determine that he has. I enclose, herewith, a clipping obtained from his things which he will not miss [*the agent attached a chess column from Washington Post of March 31, 1918 offering biographical details on Sournin – OGU*]. Reference is made herein to his giving enlisted in the Spanish American War. There were several suit cases in his room that could not be opened. He seems to be without definite associates.

Before formally approaching him for full information concerning him and arranging a complete inspection of his papers we would appreciate any information available concerning him in order to facilitate an intelligent handling of the case. There does not appear to be an indication of his leaving Charleston immediately.

With best wishes,
Truly Yours,
[*First name indecipherable - OGU*] Bocock
Special Agent

Atlanta Office

[Source: *FBI Case Files, Old German Files*, 1909-1921, Vladimir Sournin #270182; [NARA](#) M1085, Roll 685]

Another subsequent report noted that the Washington office started a discrete investigation of Sournin. A document dated August 29, 1918 and signed by H. P. Allen, revealed the following:

IN RE: VLADIMIR SOURNIN, (SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER)

AT WASHINGTON:

As a result of receipt by this office of a letter on the above subject, written by Agent Bocock, of Charleston, S. C., I called on Mr. Frank B. Walker, an employe [sic] in the General Land Office, Washington, D. C., Room 2344 and learned from him that he had met Subject about the close of the Spanish-American war in which Subject had served as volunteer. Informant met Subject due to their mutual membership in the Washington Chess Club.

Informant says that Subject is Russian born; that his father was a Russian officer and stood very high in that country; that Subject, himself, told Informant he was a graduate of one of the Russian Universities and that he had found it advisable for him to leave the

country of his birth, due to his liberal views and the fact that he was "against the Czar." He came to the United States not long before the Spanish-American war and explained to Informant that had he not done so he would probably have been sent to Siberia.

About six or eight years ago, Informant and one Col. Thos. H. Anderson, patent attorney, formerly having offices at 17th and F. Sts., Washington, D. C. were witnesses to Subject's "citizenship papers," which were taken out in the District of Columbia.

Some time since, Subject became naturalized in this country. He went back to Russia and there delivered a series of lectures, (it is understood by Informant), on his work in Panama, he having been employed by the Government Panama Canal Commission during the construction of the canal to make maps. Before leaving for Russia, however, his proposed lectures were censored by the Russian embassy, so Subject told Informant. Under official instructions, Subject has also been engaged to make [a] map of the United States.

Informant last saw Subject early in the spring, just passed "when he was on his way back to Charleston from Russia." This meeting between the two men was at the rooms of the Capital City Chess Club in the Washington Loan & Trust Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Informant Walker then showed me a letter dated August 5, 1918, from Subject at 130 E. Bay St., Charleston, S.C., asking that Mr. Walker and Mr. Halstead, Chief of the Division of Customs, Treasury Department, used their good services to secure for him a position, for instance, in the _____ Maps Reproducing Plant, and further asking that they phone to Capt. Ruth, at Washington Barracks, at the end of the 7th Street. Another man whom Subject wanted Mr. Halstead to see in his behalf is one Mr. Buell.

Subject is said by Informant to be a very good draftsman and is now on lookout for another position, as "the civilian draftsmen who are engaged here on the military maps have been advised to seek other positions before the first of the year, as it is intended to replace them with regularly enlisted men."

Informant gave me the name of one Andrew Braid, of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, this city, as one who might give some information concerning Subject.

I called on Mr. Andrew Braid, Hydro-graphic and Geodetic engineer, Room 647, at the Coast & Geodetic Survey, who stated that on the return of the Subject after his last trip to Russia, he got a job either with the War or Navy Department, and came to see this informant, whom he told of his success in getting something to do.

Subject was formerly employed at the Coast & Geodetic Survey, where his work consisted in the preparation of charts, etc. This was the first job, Informant believes, that Subject had in this country.

A copy of this report is being forwarded to Agent Bocock, at Charleston, South Carolina.

[Source: *FBI Case Files, Old German Files*, 1909-1921, Vladimir Sournin #270182; [NARA](#) M1085, Roll 685]

In 1920-1921, Sournin was still the leading player in Washington. The chess columns from the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times* contain quite a number of his games played in the local championships or against illustrious visitors. In July 1921, Sournin was accepted to play in the Eighth American Chess Congress held in Atlantic City, July 9-20. An account published in the *American Chess Bulletin* [Vol. 18, July-August 1921, pages 125-140] noted Sournin's musical talent: "Vladimir Sournin, of Washington, as an entertainer was a host in himself, for he rendered several operatic selections with a fine force and feeling" (page 127). Sournin scored +4 -3 =4 and tied for the fifth

prize of \$50 (the same score as Samuel Factor and Frank J. Marshall), behind David Janowski, Norman T. Whitaker, Charles Jaffe, and Martin D. Hago. Sournin defeated Whitaker, the second prize winner, and Jaffe, the third prize winner.



The participants in the Eighth American Chess Congress, Atlantic City; Sournin is in the second row, sitting third from the left between Samuel Factor and David Janowski [Source: American Chess Bulletin, Vol. 18, No. 6, July-August 1921, page 128]

[Click here to enlarge image](#)

Two years later, in the summer of 1923, Sournin took part in the Ninth American Chess Congress held in Lake Hopatcong (August 6-21) next to Marshall, Janowski, Edward Lasker, Abraham Kupchick, Schapiro, Chajes, and Hodges as the top players in a field of fourteen. He finished ninth with +4 –6 =3 scoring against Lasker and Hodges. Here is his energetic win over Palmer:

Marvin C. Palmer - Vladimir Sournin

Lake Hopatcong, Round Nine

August 16, 1923

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nd4 4.Nxd4 exd4 5.0-0 g6 6.d3 Bg7 7.Nd2 Ne7 8.f4 c6 9.Bc4 d5 10.exd5 Nxd5 11.Re1+ Ne3 12.Nf1 0-0 13.Nxe3 dxe3 14.c3 b5 15.Bb3 b4 16.d4 bxc3 17.bxc3 Qa5 18.Rxe3



18...c5 19.Bb2 Rb8 20.Qe2 Ba6 21.Qf3 c4 22.Bd1 Rb6 23.a4 Re6 24.Rxe6 fxe6 25.Qe3 Qf5 26.Bf3 Bc8 27.Qe2 Qxf4 28.Ba3 Bxd4+ 29.Kf1 Qxh2 30.cxd4 Qh1+ 31.Kf2 Qxa1 32.Bxf8 Qxd4+ 33.Kg3 Kxf8 34.Be4 Kg7 35.Bf3 e5 36.Be4 Bf5 37.Bf3 Qf4+ 38.Kf2 e4 39.Qb2+ Kh6 40.Qf6 Qd2+ 41.Kg1 Qe1+ 42.Kh2 exf3 43.Qf8+ Kh5 0-1 [Brooklyn Daily Eagle, November 8, 1923]



Participants at the Lake Hopatcong 1923 tournament. Seated (left to right): Janowski, (Edward) Lasker, Marshall; Standing (first row): Kupchik, Schapiro, Santasiere, Black, Tenner, Palmer, Hodges, Bigelow, Chajes, Mutchler, Cassel. Far back: Helms, Sharp, Lawrence, Morrison, Sournin, Trefzer
 [Source: page 158 of Robert Sherwood's *Chicago 1926 & Lake Hopatcong 1926 Chess Tournaments* (Caissa Editions, 2009)]

[Click here to enlarge image](#)

Sournin's musical gig in Atlantic City in 1921 was not a singular episode. An ad from the *Washington Post* of April 4, 1924 announced that during a show organized by the Military Legion Service and the Chamber of Commerce in the Masonic Auditorium, Sournin, "the Russian baritone," was one of the major attractions of the evening.

Sournin continued to play chess in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but remained confined to the Washington stage. In 1940, he moved to Baltimore where he passed away on August 21, 1942. A brief obituary, penned by one of the Washington chess insiders, was published in the *American Chess Bulletin* [Vol. 39, No. 4, September-October 1942, page 84].

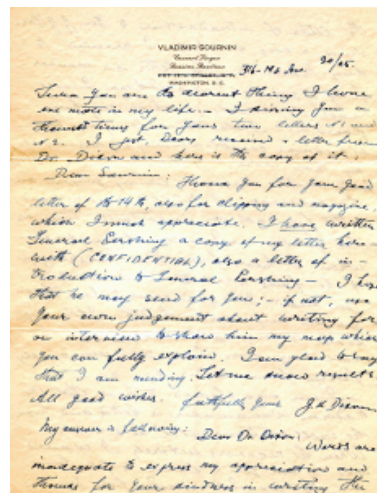
More about Sournin, not so much the chess player but the man, was found by Dale Dulaney among the old papers of a county clerk in the state of Virginia. Below is the full story that contributes further to the portrait of Vladimir Sournin, an adventurer with an unusual life.

"My Dearest Miss Lura": Lunenburg Letters Illuminate a Long and Unlikely Love Affair

Contributed by Dale Dulaney, Assistant Archivist, [The Library of Virginia](#)

Lura Royall was a Lunenburg County girl. Her relatives remember her as a pretty woman who never married—a retired school teacher full of life well into old age. But there was a part of her life that remained a secret from her living relatives. It was a secret recently revealed in ninety-seven letters and postcards written to her from her fiancé, a Russian émigré named Vladimir Sournin, across a span of twenty-one years.

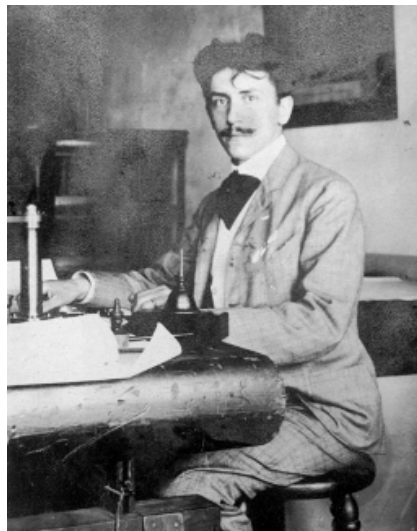
These letters, part of several cubic feet of papers left in the old courthouse by former Lunenburg County Clerk John L. Yates, were stashed among bills, statements, and personal business correspondence. How the letters ended up in Yates's file cabinets is uncertain, but they reveal an on-again-off-again relationship between the couple that started in 1898 and lasted until at least 1925.



Sample of Sourmin's handwritten letters;
the header of the letter reads: "Vladimir Sourmin,
Concert Singer, Russian Baritone"
[Click here to enlarge image](#)

The Intense and Charming Russian

Vladimir Sourmin's life is a little-known historical footnote now, but he was no ordinary man. Ambitious and talented, his career and interests led him to three continents where his path intersected with major world events and some of the most well-known people of his day. His letters reveal him to be supremely confident in his abilities and fearless in attempts to achieve his goals. This same persistence is evident in his effort to woo Lura Royall.



Vladimir Sourmin – undated photograph
[John L. Yates Papers, The Library of Virginia]

Vladimir was born in 1875 into a military family in Mstislavl, Russia. In St. Petersburg, Russia, he became an expert chess player sharpening his game under a world champion. While studying in Paris he became enamored of the American cause during the Spanish-American War and volunteered for the U. S. Army infantry. Afterward he stayed in Washington, D.C., and began a career with the U.S. Geological Survey as a cartographer, eventually being recognized as one of the country's best draftsmen. He completed a well-regarded survey of the Panama Canal Zone, then under construction, and was awarded a presidential medal for his work there. Several of Vladimir's letters from 1908 were sent from the Canal Zone.

He toured as a lecturer speaking about the canal across Europe and the United States, but his triumphant tour seemed to hit a dead end in Russia. In a letter dated September 15, 1912, he wrote to Lura asking for money to help buy a ticket back to the United States after an absence of two years. He claimed that a hospital stay after an illness had left him nearly destitute, his lectures were being suppressed, and his motiograph, a hand-cranked picture projector, had

been confiscated. He wrote, "O Miss Lura...I can tell you... Russia is not the place for an ambitious man." It was not the last time he would ask her for money.

It is unclear whether he left Russia in 1912, but there is a second letter to Lura from Vladimir in Russia dated March 1915, when World War I was raging across Europe. He wrote, "Now, Miss Lura, in the most bitter moment in my life—I pray [sic] you help me! The condition of this horrible war is indescribable... it's awful..." In this letter he again asks her for money for the fare back to the United States, adding that he had sustained minor wounds. Given his family background, Vladimir most likely served as an officer in the Russian army in some capacity. The circumstances of his escape from Russia are unclear. Did he desert the Russian Army? Was he in Russia during the Russian Revolution of 1917? The next correspondence to Lura in the collection from Vladimir was, of all things, a postcard from Hawaii dated January 24, 1918. Later, in March of that year, he wrote to express his joy at being back in the United States and promised to repay the \$10 he owed her as soon as he got a new federal mapmaking job.



*Lura Royall (second from right) poses with her family
[John L. Yates Papers, The Library of Virginia]*

After World War I, Vladimir collaborated with General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Force in the Great War, to create a map identifying Native Americans' contributions to the war effort. The famed American Indian photographer Joseph K. Dixon personally supervised the map project and the department store magnate Rodman Wannamaker, the Sam Walton of his day, funded the effort. Vladimir proudly sent Lura some of his own correspondence with Dixon, which remains in the collection.

Also during this time, Vladimir made his mark in the American chess community. He often wrote to Lura between matches and several letters in the collection bear the letterhead of hotels where he played in tournaments. Below is a cutting from *Our Folder* containing the same photograph that appeared in the July-August 1921 issue of the *American Chess Bulletin*. Sournin sent it to Lura along with his letter and wrote the following on the margins of this cutting: "O! promise me that some day you and I will go to Atlantic City before or after our marriage?"



Cutting from Our Folder (1921) showing the group photograph of the Eight American Chess Congress with Sournin handwritten marginalia
[John L. Yates Papers, The Library of Virginia]

[Click here to enlarge image](#)

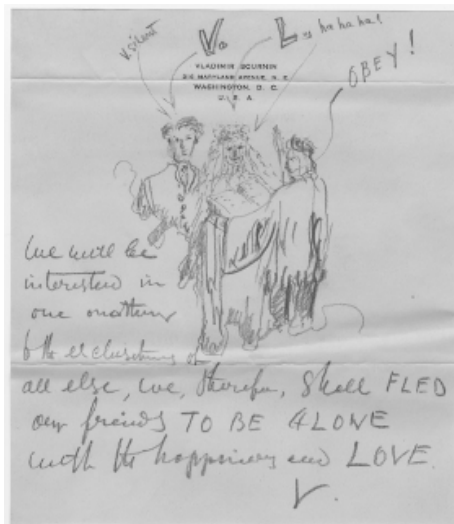
The Independent School Teacher

Lura also led an unconventional life, though she was popular with men she never married. Her teaching career in Lunenburg County gave her an income and allowed her to travel during the summer. Her brother Lucius Royall and his wife ran a boarding house in Washington, D.C. A relative remembers Lura as a social butterfly who loved taking part in all that Washington had to offer. Her dancing shoes from those days, surely well used, remain in family hands.

One can glean from Vladimir's letters that the weight of family responsibilities weighed heavily on Lura. She felt responsible for her elderly mother, who died in 1922, and for her sister Betty Sue Royall, whose once pretty face was deformed by an operation. The letters mention her sister pulling through bouts of serious illness.

Lura's independence must have attracted Vladimir, but it also seemed to worry him. He asked her to marry him in a letter dated September 20, 1924. At this point she was forty-five years old and Vladimir was forty-nine. Their intermittent relationship began when he was in his early twenties and she was nineteen. After their engagement his letters are riddled with references, joking and otherwise, to the need for her to obey him once they were married and the necessity of her leaving her teaching career to keep house.

It is unclear how Lura's health played into this period of her life. She died in 1980 at 101 in a nursing home in Blackstone. In her obituary a nephew stated that she contracted tuberculosis in 1924 and was forced to retire from teaching after a twenty-one-year career.



Two letters from Vladimir in that year are addressed to Lura at the Catawba Sanatorium near Roanoke, including the one in which he proposes marriage. Was Lura more likely to accept Vladimir's proposal after losing her career and livelihood? She regained her health, but the disease seemed to have little effect on her relationship with Vladimir.

Given his flair for the dramatic, it is not surprising that Vladimir began a singing career in the 1920s as "Vladimir Sournin, The Russian Baritone"—the title that adorned the letterhead of most of his correspondence in those years. He wrote to Lura with a detailed business plan showing how his singing would fund their eventual marriage.

What may be the last letter between the two had to be literally pieced together. In it, Vladimir asks her for \$50 immediately while promising to pay other debts he owes her, writing that it will be the last time he borrows money from her "till we marry." Then, after professing his love for her, he writes in uncharacteristically poor English, "You see Dear, your sister (Bettie Sue) is ill, look not well, for she is OLD Maide, and that will be same thing with you, my dear, so you better be my wife [*sic*]." After this he drew a picture of a sock with an arrow pointing to it and intimated that she, like all old maids, had money hidden away and should not be stingy. Lura ripped the letter to shreds.

This cruelty was probably the last straw for Lura. Though the letter was undated, it was similar in physical form to others written in 1925. It seems certain from a few of the letters that at least some of Lura's brothers, including Lucius Royall, did not like Vladimir. The intense and charming Russian was probably popular with women, and he included in many of his letters to Lura correspondence from another woman still pursuing him, Virginia Kennedy, a widow from St. Mary's County, Maryland.

Lura asked Vladimir to keep their engagement a secret from her family and even asked him to burn her letters, most likely because Vladimir would not have had complete privacy in his boarding house room.

Neither Vladimir nor Lura ever married. He died in 1942 in Baltimore and is buried in Baltimore National Cemetery. His skills are still known in chess circles and his matches are still studied. Lura is buried in the Tussekiah Baptist Church Cemetery in Lunenburg County and is fondly remembered by relatives who knew her. Without these letters the memory of Lura Royall's relationship with Vladimir Sournin would have died with her in 1980. How they ended up in the courthouse is a mystery. Did she or a relative consider a breach-of-promise lawsuit against Vladimir and deposit the letters there? Or did Lura, who may have worked briefly for the clerk, put the letters where she thought they would be safe from prying eyes? Whatever the answer may be, it is fortunate that this intensely personal glimpse into two lives survives.

Postscript We thank Mr. Dulaney for granting us the permission to republish his findings.

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