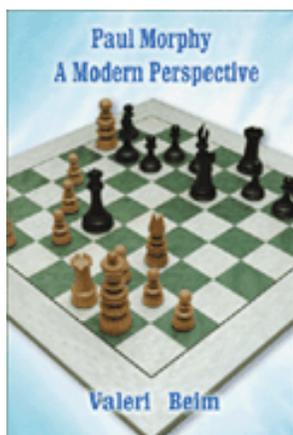




SKITTLES
ROOM



Monologues of a Chess Guru

by Vera Tsvetkova

Alexander Roshal talks about himself and his times

In 1968, Alexander Roshal, the youngest Merited Trainer in the country, abandoned his profession for journalism; together with Tigran Petrosian he began putting out the weekly chess magazine 64. On more than one occasion, he was voted among the best in his new field, even receiving the Order and Title of Merited Cultural Worker.



Few know that 64 was the first to publish Nabokov in the USSR, in 1986, by printing an excerpt from his Other Shores [autobiography – Tr.]. For this, Roshal received a serious punishment, even though at that time Anatoly Karpov was listed as Editor-In-Chief. In 1992, the magazine went out of existence because of what was described as “hard times.” And had there been no Alexander Roshal, there would have been no such magazine today. He resurrected it and then privatized it (64 became the first privatized print edition in the country), and since that time, Roshal not only proudly calls himself editor-In-chief, but publisher as well.

For many, Roshal embodies chess journalism, acting as the public voice of chess for the greater masses. This energetic and sociable person completely belies his age – he is active, sharp-witted, and talkative – one could listen to him for hours, like a nightingale. It doesn't matter what the conversation is about – journalism, chess, or his adored watchdog breed, Cane Corso. He represents the generation born in the Thirties – yes, that's how they are.



Alexander Roshal with Susan Polgar

Long Live the Union

From its very inception, the USSR was the classic chess nation. Not a building-block – chess was a weapon of the proletariat; thus, the first Soviet government was a government of chessplayers. A real chess fever erupted in the 25th year of the last century, and, after a short hiatus, was able to continue because 70% of those playing chess were children. The idea of a “Russian School of Chess” is one that I consider incorrect. It would be truer to call it a National School of Chess – that’s a more neutral expression than Soviet School, and closer to the truth. The system was not created in Russia, but in the Soviet Union. When I call on people to show respect for chess in the USSR, I am only trying to be objective – certainly I’m not trying to apologize for what went on then in our country. Because if you look at the list of world champions, what do we see? Petrosian – an Armenian from Tbilisi; Tal – a Latvian Jew; Kasparov – a half-Armenian, half-Jew from Baku; Nona Gaprindashvili – from the Soviet Republic of Georgia; Karpov – from the Urals; Smyslov – from Moscow ... Paul Keres, who represented Soviet Estonia, was never champion, “always second” – he was the ideal of many, myself included to some extent. Everyone in the Union’s world of chess emulated him. The first Westernized fellow among us, who ate, dressed, even shaved well, and walked in polished boots. To this day, when I visit the World Team Championship or the Olympics, I catch myself feeling like I’m back at the Peoples’ Spartakiad of the USSR – because most of the people there are either former or current citizens.

Here’s what distinguishes our national chess school from the foreign – the same thing that distinguishes Russian classical literature from Western: it’s more philosophical, more ruminative; it has roots it has grown from. We should get down to the basics: what is chess, for what purpose does it exist? In the West, everything’s more utilitarian. I assure you, chess is one element of our culture. Chess tournaments in Moscow were held at the Museum of Art and in theaters – that should tell you something. Even if you go by our chess alone – we are a very cultured nation.

Our National Mentality

No one talks about a national moment, for example, in our football. Petrosian once joked, “We play our sports wrong: Herskowitz in football, Karpov in chess – it should be the other way around.” Every nation has its own assumptions. Stubbornness, willingness to work, and resourcefulness show up most noticeably in chess among the Jews and Armenians. I was once asked – since the best in gymnastics are the most graceful, and the best in running are the quickest, does that mean the best chessplayers are the smartest? No, I would say, different chessplayers have different amounts of brainpower. We have the so-called “Walther paradox.” He was an ardent chessplayer and spent a great deal of time on it, but from time to time some guy off the street would come along and win all his money. The strongest players are “half-and-half.” I don’t like the racist term “half-bloods,” but some sort of mixed-blood reaction is exceptionally useful for chess – it adds in some missing qualities.

Today in chess, we are seeing changes in our national team – and why? We have gained new freedoms: we’ve entered banking, we’ve joined the oligarchy, now we have other choices. We hold our finger to the wind. Electronic programs are being put together to allow the machine to beat humans – so why go into chess when there’s a computer future ahead? This is all so Jewish. The Armenian team has now taken third place in the world championships for some years running. Exiles from Armenia go to play chess for Russia – or, say, to Germany, where they get a stipend from their sports committee. Azerbaijan is experiencing a chess boom with government support – because, they say, we are not worse than the Armenians and we will show the whole world.

Chess is a distilled version both of politics and of life: it’s long been an acknowledged model of the world. As I’ve said before, we started to develop chess in the dawn of Soviet hegemony. Who took up chess? Any “fifth point” (Jew) and all such people. [In old Soviet passports the fifth line was about nationality and Jews were often discriminated against. *A tip of the Translator’s hat to GM Alex Baburin, of [ChessToday](#).*] The Pioneer Palaces grew and multiplied, and circles of interest – the State nourished the talented offspring, who were not from the most fortunate families with the same national or non-proletarian background. You might have been suitable material, but your career path was restricted – you had to find a way out yourself. Thus was created an artificial struggle for survival. Chess is the only skill that’s measured in points. “That’s not music – it’s cacophony” – and the genius Shostakovich is sidelined from music. The same thing could happen to a writer, and in publishing. And here was a championship in which it was written of Petrosian that, well, his play was foreign to the Soviet Chess School – it wasn’t aggressive, wasn’t fighting, too many draws... And – nothing happened. He won one game, then another, then the championship – followed by an Order [*as in “medal”* – *Tr.*] from the government, the Trainer’s title, and became famous himself. And still he

asked: who wrote that bad stuff about me? Thus it happened that I, and those like me, could only achieve anything in life through chess or something related to it. Let me assure you I'm a self-made man. And that's because I wanted very badly to become somebody. And today, I remain firmly convinced that I have *not* become that complete somebody. Everyone's looking at me in surprise, but this isn't being funny. Have I achieved so much? Look at others for comparison. In other circumstances, I could have turned out differently.

Relatives, Homeland, and Patriotism

I am an MFTC: Member of the Family of a Traitor to the Country. My father was arrested, on the day that I turned one-year-old, for being the author of one of the first constitutions of Israel. He was shot. He used to argue, you understand, with Kaganovich over who should have the right to be called a real Jew. To use the expression of those times, my father was shot for a cause. Mother spent 18 years in prison, prison camp, and exile (I lived with her from 9 to 16-years-old). You'd think I would have gone straight into becoming a dissident. Korchnoi once asked the question: How did he come to betray his family by his life, how did he ever come to serve this government?! Perhaps our upbringing had something to do with it – my relations hid all of this from me, by speaking in Yiddish whenever I was around. Fearing I would grow up to be a popular avenger, and even more afraid that I would meet a similar fate, my family avoided ever speaking about the subject. Later, I found out that my father had written a booklet, *In the Grip of the Agrarian Crisis*, and all the rest ... Right after my relatives' arrest, there came the knock on the door, and they hid me under a big table with a floor-length tablecloth to keep me from going into the orphanage. Later on, my grandmother was officially made my guardian.

When I was 9, my mother's brother took me with him to Kazakhstan. She was waiting for us at the train station, standing in her padded jacket and weeping. My uncle told me, "Go – that's your mother." I started for her, but then got scared and went back to him. I consider that my great betrayal – I should already have been feeling something. Mama spent her whole life paying for what had been done – she was one of the last to be rehabilitated, in 1956. One time, I gave her a story to read: *Sanochki*, by Georgy Zhzhenov, who spent 17 years in the camps. She read it, and said, "Yes, he was certainly there." Later, when I spoke to Zhzhenov, I relayed her camp history to him and he told me, "She was there." This parallel undertaking was like their camp brotherhood for me.

When I hear the word, "Stalin," it's like my hand reaches for a pistol by itself; I cannot hear it and remain still. And when, at age 53, I became the first medalist of the Aktiubinsk School for Working Youth, I wrote in the special edition, which went into the album of achievers, that our ruler had gone, who saw further than any of us. Was I lying then? One day I woke in a cold sweat – I dreamed something nasty about Stalin. What a relief it was for me to realize it had only been a dream!

During the Brezhnev era, I traveled a great deal all over the world. At first, I was only rarely let out, and even then after great difficulties – all of the places in the delegation were spoken for far in advance.



Alexander Roshal, executing the “special task” of organizing the already-scrubbed candidates’ match between Korchnoi and Kasparov.
(Taken from a Yugoslav paper, 1983)

In 1975, Karpov played in a sort of exam/tournament in Milan – show us, won’t you, what you’re worth – a new champion who didn’t play Fischer for his title? Once again, I was “peeled off” at the last moment. Tolya pounded his little fist on the table: if Roshal can’t come to the tournament, I’m going to call the Central Committee. At that time, I worked for all the magazines, radio, TASS, and the weekly *64*. In my notebook, I have little notes about which thought or phrase was intended for whom – that way, I wouldn’t repeat it to the wrong people. I worked myself up an awful “cauliflower ear,” dictating to various editors for days at a time. The doctor later determined that, for those 23 days, my median sleep time was less than four hours a night. After that, we spent a week touring Italy – when I, to tell the truth, sometimes fell asleep standing up – like a workhorse. Those were the days for which I, the Blessed One, was envied by my colleagues. But they could not even have guessed at the goings-on in Baguio. People sympathetic to Korchnoi asked me to stay on in the West – in ‘78, during the match in Baguio, and in ‘81, in Merano – without his knowledge, of course. And, of course, it’s possible that it was with *our* government’s knowledge. Then I remembered, not the Kremlin with its golden onions, but the River Ilel in Kazakhstan, and its prisoners – standing up to their chests in the water, cutting reeds for mats, with the white flies buzzing down out of the sky, my mother among the prisoners ... And our little two-wagon train, moving between Aktiubinsk, our shtetl, and the zone that the “zeks” called

“Incoming.”

This is my country, and not yours, old and new beginners! My homeland is the Little Komsomol alley, where I was born in the ghetto, and where my father was arrested. If I dislike those who call themselves the party of “National Safety,” it does not mean I have no love for my country. I cannot stay too long out of the country – I am from here. I am a Russian Jew, I was raised Russian; my life has made me more of a Russian than many of those who represent us. But never touch my nationality.

When I first arrived in Israel, God knows what strong feelings I experienced, enjoyed, was overcome by ... But oh, how much venom I heard from our exiles: “Damn it to hell, Russia – how they persecuted us.” I saw one “patriot” there – in the USSR, he was the director of an auto plant, kept a thousand workers fed; meanwhile, they sent him enough materials for three thousand – “Boy, was I cooking! But Mama called, said, Come here – what could I do, I had to think of some way.” And such people have the nerve to scold people like me! And I would categorically deny that anybody who would return to this country now, and try to teach me to become a dissident, has the right to do that. Although, of course, there are some very, very real personalities.

I’m no revolutionary – perhaps because they beat the desire out of me or cut off that particular appendage – anyway, that’s what Korchnoi thinks. In 1972, he and I saw *Doctor Zhivago* together in Belgrade. After the show, some people approached us and sympathized: how very hard it must be to live in your country. But at that time, there was no better defender and propagandist of the Soviet government than Korchnoi! But, then, life moved the barricades around, and not so long ago, he called me his “friendly enemy” in his book. He, like Kasparov, ought to remember who helped set up their scrubbed candidates’ match. And generally speaking, I could remind him of much. I don’t have to apologize for having traveled so much, nor for having written so much, nor for whatever I have achieved in the chess business. My greatest difficulty in life has always been to make myself properly understood. And I will insist, at the top of my lungs, that nobody ever say that I betrayed either my homeland or my father’s memory.

Students & Friends

I am not a very strong chessplayer. I am probably a good but not a great trainer of a number of real chessplayers. I can no longer even remember all my students. So these days, I do it this way: anyone who considers me his teacher – *that* was one of my students. I don’t know if Mikhail Shvydkoi, or Deputy Andrei Makarov, or “pundit” Mikhail Barshevsky remember me as a teacher. I definitely know that Sasha Nekipelov, the President of the Academy, remembers me. I’m afraid I might forget somebody, or insult somebody – but I am still more afraid of claiming another’s student as my own. The poet Igor Irteniev asked me once, “Don’t you remember me? Of course, I had a different last name then – Rabinovich.” I worked as a trainer

to many, but many more went elsewhere.

I was friends with Tal and Polugaevsky – in fact, we were friends even without chess. With them, I truly lived life. And I'm not sure my poor pen would be enough to describe such people. Tal truly sparkled – he was a firework of a man, whose aphorisms were minted on the fly. He was a witness at all my weddings. Now Tal has died, so I will remain wedded to Irina forever. But Mishka-Genius and Polugai-Cub will not pass this way again.



This picture of me, with Karpov and Kasparov, was taken in London 1984, not long before their first match in Moscow.

(From the Alexander Roshal archives)

Kasparov and Politics

The photograph of me, with Karpov and Kasparov, was taken in London in '84, not long before their first Moscow match. The picture was a candid one, then, I took a drink and said:

“I bet you I can tell what you're thinking.”

“What?”

“Who is Roshal rooting for? But hey – more than the both of you, I'm rooting for somebody else.”

“And who's that?”

“For myself.”

I know and understand Kasparov well, even though life has forged a close bond between me and Karpov. I would seem to be a Karpist by definition, but to a small degree I feel I understand Kasparov better. Karpov and I are different characters, while Kasparov and I are more alike. Karpov is of genetically pure Russian stock. But where is the Russian – where is that Russian boldness, recklessness, the jaunty style? Kasparov stands ready to

take a spear in the chest. When he was on top of his game, we had unequal relations. Nowadays, when he's some sort of half-horse, half-politico, I fear for him, being the gifted representative of chess to the wide world. He always felt pressed in the channels of chess. He is a man of extremes: *pasionaria*. He cannot abide the middle ground; he must always be at the center of attention. He cannot be second – only first. This is dangerous for party-building, because a party is more than just one person. Sometimes, for him, the end is more important than the means. He is much attached to the result, and might break some bones along the way. He has decided that wherever he goes he is Kasparov; Kasparov in everything. He enjoys overcoming the insurmountable; he always wants to overthrow, to show that only his way will everything be better. He would have made sense to Keres the Estonian – who never liked Soviet rule, but once said, “You know, I can't beat my head against the wall.” And, in that way, he maintained his honor. Furthermore, Kasparov lacks a sense of self-irony, the ability to take himself lightly and a readiness to compromise. I suspect that politics will excise the categorical decisions and straightforward evaluations right out of him.

What are politicians? All of them are very heavyweight people – as heavy as rooks. They all think that every move of theirs decides the game (see – you can make a chess analogy about anything in life). When did you decide that your move is the only one that wins? There is such a thing as *zugzwang* – when there's no good move; when every move is bad. Why is a politician such a dark thing – why does everyone call him dirty? I have no memory of a time when we had a light, cheery, sunny politician. What a pleasure that would be – a politician of light! We don't have enough light politicians, with self-irony – hey, it looks like I accidentally said something profound! I should like to see, in our country, a person who was *not* feared (sometimes, Kasparov is used to frighten people with). Putin's greatest achievement has been to convince the population that somehow he is absolutely not fearsome. And this will be the chief task of whoever comes after him – to convince everybody that “Hey, I'm your boy – I'm one of you.”

Completely not “New Vasiuki”

Not long ago, in the *Galeria* restaurant, a Swiss watch company organized a beautiful society event: World Champion Vladimir Kramnik gave a 30-board simultaneous exhibition. There were no professional chessplayers in attendance, but there were many respectable people, who played respectably well: Lugansky, the pianist; the fanatical chessplayer Lord Portman (husband of our model Vodyanova); and Remuchkov, the assistant to the head of the Department for the Economic Development of Mines, who stayed on a long time, finally getting mated on the 42nd move. As host for the evening, I doled him out a compliment for his wide-ranging chess knowledge.

Personally, I found it incredibly pleasant to see a cultured businessman – even such as our recently departed (though not for the business planning at

“Inteco”) Muscovite brother Baturin. Generally, speaking of business and chess, I am not going to judge Iljumzhinov, for example, on whether he is a good president and businessman, but the fact that he turned to chess has made many players grateful. I would like Abramovich to support chess too, not just football. Same with all the others. Where are you, businessmen – chess is waiting! Your reputation won't suffer from us – in fact, the reverse.

The Ninth File

As a representative of chess in journalism, I would like to bring society together with chess, and chess with society, in a sort of marriage. And I would leave in chess journalism, in chess culture, not just a strong thematic pen, but something that explains why all this is necessary. Our country needs to understand that chess is medicinal – without any other symptoms and for many of our ills. When government and business fail to pay sufficient attention to medicine or education, it is not the hospitals or the schools that suffer, but the people, the nation. Indifference to chess – not just to the world championship – is also costly to society. Although there are benefits as well: in the club cars, along with dominoes and card games, we now have chess and a magazine.

On eight files of the chessboard, the pieces weave their patterns; on the ninth file, unseen by us, they weave character. And the chief struggle is not on the board, because victory on that unseen ninth file will sweep all before it. It's the same in life: the main events do not occur on the field where everyone can see. And that's why chess is such a model for life.

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