

Smyslov on the Couch

Genna Sosonko

Smyslov on the Couch

Author: Genna Sosonko

Translated from the Russian by Reilly Costigan-Humes and Ilan Rubin.

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov (www.elkov.ru).

© LLC Elk and Ruby Publishing House, 2018 (English version, expanded versus the Russian version). All rights reserved.

© Genna Sosonko and Andrei Elkov, 2016 (Russian version). All rights reserved.

Select passages of this book were previously published in English as an essay “Death, Where Is Thy Sting?” in *The World Champions I Knew* by Genna Sosonko, New In Chess, 2013, and, before that, in *New In Chess* magazine. Reproduced with kind permission from New In Chess and retranslated by Elk and Ruby. The version of David Bronstein’s article ‘*Thrown*’ *Games in Zurich* included in this book was first published in English in *Secret Notes* by Bronstein and S. Voronkov, Edition Olms, 2007. Reproduced with kind permission from Edition Olms and the translator of that book, Ken Neat.

Smyslov’s article *A Battle in Amsterdam* included in this book was first published in Russian in the December 2001 (no. 12) issue of *64 – Chess Review*. Reproduced with kind permission from *64 – Chess Review*. We are unaware of any prior English translation and the translation given here is our own.

Front cover photo: Ararat Hotel, Moscow, 2004, at the opening of the Armenia versus the Rest of the World match. Genna Sosonko captained the Rest of the World team and Vasily Smyslov was an honored guest.

Other photos: the author’s personal photos and from the archives of *64 – Chess Review*.

Follow us on Twitter: @ilan_ruby

www.elkandruby.com

ISBN 978-5-9500433-2-1

Contents

PART 1: The Real Vasily Smyslov.....	5
PART 2: Match Fixing in Zurich and the Soviet Chess School	73
PART 3: The Final Years.....	135

PART 1:

The Real Vasily Smyslov

“Today’s a special day, Vasily Vasilievich.”

“Why’s it so special?”

“Fischer’s turning sixty.”

“You must be kidding! I can still picture him as a little boy. Time really flies. Fischer’s already sixty! People read out to me statements he’s made recently. He’s insane, yes, he is. Those ideas of his are insane... But you know what? Somebody asked me to sign my book for Bobby a little while ago – he really liked my effort. I signed it for him, of course. Mrs. Smyslov had one of her girlfriends over this morning, and she asked whether or not Fischer really was the most brilliant chess player of all time. Now, that’s what I call a coincidence. I said, “He really was, of course, but there were some other most brilliant players besides him. By the way, Fischer’s birthday isn’t the only special occasion today. It’s Shrove Sunday! We all have to ask one another for forgiveness. So, please forgive me, Gennady Borisovich, if I’ve ever said or done anything wrong.”

“And you forgive me, too, Vasily Vasilievich.”

I first saw Smyslov on the Kirov Islands, a huge park near Leningrad. It was some chess event as I recall, with a simultaneous exhibition. A tall, classy gentleman strolling from table to table and a thick circle of spectators around the players. That was way back in 1956; it feels like pre-historic times now.

We played our first official game twenty years later at the interzonal tournament in Biel, Switzerland. Two years after, we spent nearly all our free time together at the Sao Paulo tournament. Smyslov was fifty-seven, and I didn’t have the slightest inkling that I’d write about him one day. We simply had a unique bond, and the many years between us didn’t make

us feel like we were different ages. We got together countless times – including at his Moscow apartment, at his dacha, and at my place in Amsterdam, not just at tournaments and chess Olympiads. We spoke on the phone just a few days before he checked into the hospital from which he never came home.

Smyslov was far more interesting in casual conversations than when speaking to the press. In interviews, looming subconscious thoughts always reigned him in – *What will the higher-ups at the Chess Federation think? Will an off-hand comment bar me from the next tournament abroad? What will they think about what I said?* So he always kept a tight hold on himself and hid behind stock phrases. As a result, all of his interviews, even in the post-Soviet days, when he no longer had to hold back, seem flat and dull.

We developed a unique, lighthearted tone that we could demonstrate at great length. It may have looked like two superannuated students keeping a joke running for years, but our talks would often touch upon rather tragic subjects, which were surely no laughing matter. I never made light of Smyslov, though, despite our outwardly light tone, and I definitely don't now; that would be the worst kind of injustice and ingratitude.

His monologues were so interesting that I found myself thinking, “this can't be forgotten, this part of chess history shouldn't be lost.” Remembering Horace's words – “trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may” – I started recording his stories. At times, I cite seemingly trivial facts, but just as every minor detail helps a detective get to the bottom of things, some of my notes capture Smyslov's personality much more effectively than a simple list of his accolades could.

I think he knew the point of our sessions, and he even prepared for a few of them and tried to articulate his thoughts lucidly. He once said, “You have to write a lot of things down,

Genna. You know, it's very beneficial to keep a journal, since the details disappear from your memory and major events start to blur. Not to mention there are some memories that people just don't like to preserve."

When I was unfurling our long string of dialogues, I made a conscious decision to preserve the inarticulate quality of verbal exchanges and remove certain flattering words pertaining to me. I left some of them in, but only in rare cases, so as to ensure that our conversations don't feel disjointed. I ventured to actually quote Smyslov – I do not retell his monologues, but rather reproduce them, word for word. The talks I recorded have preserved his living, breathing Moscow accent, with its long a's instead of unstressed o's. He would speak in a slightly antiquated way, with phrases such as "ereyesterday", "in these times", "erewhile", "it's the devil's work", "the devil beguiled", "I should have used dental pliers" (a quote from a Chekhov work, which when employed by Smyslov boiled down to "I used one method but should have used another") and "*vanitas vanitatum*". He would often repeat the maxim – *fait ce que dois, advienne que pourra* (do what should be done and what will be will be) – either in French or Russian.

One time, I told him about Krylov, the famous Russian fabulist, who didn't write a single autobiographical sketch or glance at a biography about him that was written for an encyclopedia, even when he was asked to proofread it. "Let them write what they want," was his response.

"That's it! You have to do what you were put on this Earth to do, and then people will write about you," Smyslov said.

Like most people, he did the bulk of his reading as a child and adolescent, but it stuck with him forever. He would relish quoting the Russian classics, and do it often, peppering our chats with old adages, aphorisms, and distiches from Pushkin,

Griboyedov, Nekrasov, and Maykov, or lines from Gogol and Ostrovsky etched in his memory.

I asked him once, “When was the last time you read Gogol, Vasily Vasilievich? Sixty years ago?”

“Sixty? Try seventy and some.”

I’d find myself slipping into his style and using his turns of phrase whenever we met. “Well there, Genna, I guess you were too busy for a walk yesterday, preparing for your game and all?” he asked me while I was still upset after a loss. “Fate at last ran down its quarry.”

“Sure did,” I heard myself saying. “The stars must not have been aligned. I should have used dental pliers.” This astrological reference was a favorite expression of his, and he could come out with it in all sorts of circumstances. When Spassky invited him to his marriage ceremony at the Moscow registry office back in 1976 Smyslov declined the offer. “God helps him who helps himself,” he explained. His thinking was that, with Spassky being “sanctioned” at the time and planning to marry a foreign citizen, it was wise to decline. “The way the stars are aligned I have to say no,” he continued.

Another time, when I’d just failed to beat Karpov despite being a piece up, I joined him for a walk the next morning and asked: “What did I do wrong yesterday, Vasily Vasilievich? What was it? Just don’t say the stars weren’t aligned. What should I do now?” He adjusted his glasses and replied, “let me tell you what you should do – forget it! As soon as possible! That’s what you have to do! Otherwise, you won’t be able to play at all today. Forget it!”

A fellow grandmaster, who noted that we were always together, asked: “Is Smyslov absolutely candid with you?”

Who can actually answer that question? Of course, he was only candid with his wife Nadezhda Andreevna, or Nadyusha or

Nadine. However, I wouldn't say this was candidness as such. It was something different. After all, how can you be candid with your own hand? She was part of him, and her voice could always be heard in the background whenever we spoke on the phone; it reflected something deeper than his thoughts, his unconscious reflexes perhaps. No matter where Smyslov went, he'd take a picture of Nadezhda, young and smiling, out of his suitcase and place it on the bedside table the instant he got to his hotel room.

One time, we were drinking tea at his dacha, and I asked, "when did we first meet, Vasily Vasilievich?"

"What kind of silly question is that, Genna?" Smyslov gave me a reproachful look. "You know perfectly well that we've known each other our whole lives."

He would tell me things you generally don't share with others, and not simply because we were that close. It just kind of happened that way. He could let his guard down around me, which he couldn't do around Soviet people. He didn't have to torture himself by speaking to me in butchered English or German. Moreover, my experience of living in the same country as him for nearly three decades made many things a foreigner could never understand obvious, and we shared the same profession, yet our interests never overlapped, and that's really something!

He never refused to pass things along to my relatives in Saint Petersburg. "Obviously I'll do it, Genna. But I can't say when I'll get the chance to send it from Moscow."

Now he's gone. His books, CDs and records with touching notes written on them, the letters sometimes crawling on top of each other, are left as a reminder of him. He's gone. The people he gave my Dutch presents to are long gone, too, but nothing has disappeared, not really – everything has been preserved, everything's there in my grateful memory.

It felt like Vasily Vasilievich Smyslov and I had established an ideal sense of distance in our relationship. Meeting up at tournaments and Olympiads (and, less frequently, privately) and speaking on the phone regularly (once the authorities permitted it), we developed a trusting tone without ever getting excessively familiar. Would that type of familiarity even have been possible, though? I can't remember anyone calling him by a short name, Vasya; he was Vasily Vasilievich for everyone, practically since he was a teenager.

He possessed an incredible memory, although one time, when I started needling him and bombarding with questions about the olden days, he said: "Oh Genna, don't wake my memories. What's done is done, done to oblivion. I don't remember a thing! I've been blessed with the ability to forget. There is an uncanny pattern to things, though; you best of all remember what you should forget."

He always had some new hobby, and he'd dive into it head first. In the late forties and early fifties, it was table-tipping and spiritualism, which, according to him, were a common practice among top Soviet officials. He knew many of them personally and he named some of them to me. Later on, after we became friends, he constantly talked about the afterlife, that light at the end of a long tunnel, and began nearly all his sentences with the words: *Life After Life*¹ says that... Then he took up collecting wooden idols and little decorative gods. That short-lived obsession started after his trip to Iceland in 1977, and it ended with him, thoroughly disillusioned, discarding all his dolls – out of sight and out of mind.

¹ A book by Raymond Moody first published in 1975 discussing near death experiences