

Evil-Doer:

Half a Century with Viktor Korchnoi

Genna Sosonko

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A Leap to Freedom

So what was I supposed to do? I was in the middle of a simul in the Hague and I hadn't yet taken a final decision. I could have calmly left for the reception at the Soviet embassy, returned to Leningrad the following day, and tried again next time. Political asylum. That's what Miles said it was called in English... That's easy on the tongue. At last the simul ended, I said my goodbyes to the organizers, and the cab drew up. The driver asked me, "where to, Sir?" and I didn't know what to say. I didn't know! After the driver reiterated, "where to, Sir?" I replied "Amsterdam!" I made my way to the police station early the following morning and asked for political asylum.

This is how Viktor Lvovich Korchnoi described the events of 26-27 July 1976 to me. These events radically changed not only his life. They brought a massive wave of passion to the battle for the world title (and with an obvious political backdrop) comparable to the direct confrontation between East and West during the Spassky vs. Fischer match in 1972.

Korchnoi was not the first world-class grandmaster to move from Soviet Russia to the West. When Alekhine played his world championship matches against Efim Bogoljubov in 1929 and 1934, he was known ironically in the USSR as "the Frenchman", while his opponent was called "the German" and they were referred to together as "renegades who sold their talent for the lentil soup of a bourgeois paradise". When mentioning them, the Soviets would still admit their talent: "One shouldn't forget that the ex-Soviet champions are nothing more than pygmies in politics, but in chess they are the greatest players of today". They would continue to print reports of the

“renegades” matches, as well as articles on tournaments in which they competed, commenting on their games.

However, the approach was much harsher in the Soviet Union of the 1970s. The government created all sorts of obstacles even to legal emigration (in the rare cases that it actually issued exit permits), while defectors were treated as enemies.

Almost half a century later, it's not easy to appreciate what such a decision by Korchnoi meant for a Soviet citizen, and how incredibly hard it was to make that final leap to freedom. Anybody who did this immediately became a traitor and turncoat in their home country, as was the case with famous other defectors of the time – the ballet dancers Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and Natalia Makarova, and the ice-skaters Ludmila Belousova and Oleg Protopopov, just to name a few. None of them had been a dissident. Indeed, many of those who ended up abroad were neither political opponents of the system nor dissidents in the traditional sense: it was the logic of their art that dictated breaking with the Soviet system.

Korchnoi stood out from these famous peers – and, for that matter, from the writers Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky, the musician Mstislav Rostropovich and the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky – in that his day job in the West caused the Soviets a far bigger headache... It was easy not to mention their names, not to publish their books, not to show their films and to ignore their concerts and shows, but that was impossible with Korchnoi.

In this huge empire isolated from the rest of the world, chess always enjoyed immense popularity. Korchnoi, moreover, was a four-time USSR champion and an implacable and legendary fighter at the board. Regularly battling Soviet opponents in candidates and world title matches, he constantly reminded his ex-countrymen of his presence. These merciless duels were

Chess and Chicks

I first saw Korchnoi in October 1956. The Leningrad Pioneers Palace put on chess festivals every autumn, during which its former students played in simulms with the children. I found myself up against Spassky. After that game ended in a draw, and with my heart beating with pride, I walked up to another simul, given by a young man chain-smoking *papirosi* cigarettes with a characteristic expression on his face, moving in a hurried gait from table to table. That was him.

I was standing behind a boy who couldn't make up his mind what move to play. He asked the master if he could miss his turn, explaining: "There aren't many games left and you keep returning very quickly." Korchnoi instantly emitted a laconic word that was later frequently heard by many, including me, when he was offered a draw:

“NIET!”

At the time, he was 25 years old and had only just become a grandmaster. Although his performances were less spectacular than Spassky's, Korchnoi was already a city favorite with his uncompromising playing style and behavior.

The following year, I actually got to play against him. It was during a ten-board simul using clocks and I again achieved a draw. The score sheet with the moves got lost a long time ago, but I remember pretty well how the game went. I played the Rubinstein Variation of the French Defense, as expected got a slightly worse position, but I managed to hold on. Half a century later, at a tournament in Estonia (November 2008), we played our final game against each other, also a draw. *The circle closed.*

That circle contained everything. Our time in Leningrad when we were pretty close – and when our relations became strained after I decided to emigrate from the USSR. Then once again close relations in the period after I emigrated and before he plucked up the courage to defect (1973–1976).

After that, a third period began, lasting forty long years (1976–2016), right until Korchnoi’s death. All sorts of things happened in the interim. Sometimes, there were spats. Disagreements and conflicts, as I later found out, were inevitable in any relations with him. There was a time lasting several years when we weren’t on speaking terms. But I also recall many days spent at his home in Switzerland, at my home in Amsterdam, and at tournaments and Olympiads. We didn’t just play chess. We held long conversations, and talked about everything imaginable. In his final years, when he was stuck in a wheelchair, we were in constant contact by phone. Indeed, our final conversation happened just a few days before he departed this world.

I first got to know Korchnoi through Alexander Grigorevich Bakh – the same man who introduced me to Tal. Alik, as everybody called him in those days, was a key figure in Leningrad chess. As well as Tal, his friend from when he lived in Riga, he knew everybody worth knowing.

I remember us dining together back in December 1969 in the restaurant of the European (“*Evropeiskaya*”) Hotel in Leningrad, when Korchnoi asked Misha whether the latter would mind if I went to work for him (Korchnoi) for a while. I don’t know what Tal actually thought about that, but he raised no objections. A couple of weeks later, Korchnoi and I headed for the countryside, to a sanatorium called the Architect House of Creativity located in Zelenogorsk, where we would later stay frequently in training sessions prior to tournaments and matches.