

The Professor

Max Euwe 1901-1981

In the summer of 1972 I departed the Soviet Union, my luggage consisting entirely of a strong desire to leave the country, a rather sketchy impression of the world that lay beyond its borders and a suitcase full of books. According to the rules I was allowed to carry out only books printed in the country after 1945; books printed before that date required special permission. Overcoming the obstacles thrown up by the bureaucracy, I obtained the desired stamp from the Ministry of Culture – ‘Permission to remove from the USSR’ – for a book printed in 1936.

This was a chess book. I had used it more than once to give children lessons in the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers, where I had worked as a trainer; to this day, I consider it one of the best chess books ever. I still have it. The title page reads: *Max Euwe/Chess Lessons*. When looking at the Dutch title ‘Practische schaaklessen’ on the publisher’s page, I no longer pause at the double ‘a’, so unusual in Russian, in the second word. Little could I have imagined then that within a few months of my leaving, I would be speaking to the author, meeting him frequently and even playing him in a short match.

I saw Euwe for the first time in Amsterdam in the late autumn of 1972, when he asked me to help him with one of his books on opening theory. I agreed; but then my own chess career pushed aside everything else, and we had to give up on this idea.

‘FIDE’s Staff Headquarters’ was the grandiose name given by the Soviet press to a couple of medium-sized rooms on the Passeerdersgracht in downtown Amsterdam, a few minutes’ walk from my home. On my walks I would occasionally look inside. Euwe was very often abroad, but sometimes I would find him in, and then he would ask me to translate letters he received from the Soviet Union. These letters were all very similar and almost always included requests – for autographs, photos or books. ‘Do you think this will be enough?’ he would ask me, as he signed a piece of paper or autographed a photo. ‘More than enough’, I would reply. ‘Do you really think it’s enough?’ he would re-

peat, doubtfully. In his voice, I could hear the intonations of Alexander the Great, who gave a friend fifty talents and, when the man said that ten talents would have been enough, replied: 'For you it would have been enough; it's not enough for me.'

In the autumn of 1975, we played a short two-game match in the studio of the AVRO broadcasting company in Hilversum. There was even a book published about it afterwards – *Chess Match 1975 Euwe-Sosonko* – in which his best games were displayed next to mine. I don't have to tell you what an honour this juxtaposition was for me. The book also spoke of chess in Holland and its new hope – the young Jan Timman. The original plan was for him to have been Euwe's opponent, but Jan's father died just a few days before the starting date.

Later I read, in the detailed research on Euwe's career by the Soviet grandmaster and psychologist Krogius, that 'Euwe willingly submitted to the creation of a central isolated pawn, and had great success playing these positions.' I found this to be true in the very first game of our match, in which I miraculously saved a draw. Krogius was also correct in saying: 'It was most advantageous to prepare some opening novelty – even if, with proper play, it led to no advantage. As a rule, one could count on a strong psychological impact from the unexpected.' The course of the second game fully supported this evaluation as well: the novelty I used in the Slav Defence was no stronger than that used in his match against Alekhine forty years before. But it was obvious that this type of game did not suit him, and I managed to win this game.

Ineke Bakker was Secretary of the International Chess Federation – FIDE – at the time. A few days after the match, she met the USSR Minister of Sports, Sergey Pavlov, in Moscow. 'He was beside himself with rage', she recalled later. 'What – you mean Euwe couldn't find any other opponent for this match? He forgets that he is not just a grandmaster, but the President of the International Chess Federation. This is a provocation, a provocation,' he repeated several times.' It had, of course, never occurred to Euwe to consider the political subtext of our match, even though not a single Soviet grandmaster had come to Wijk aan Zee in Holland a year earlier, precisely because of my participation. Today this seems unbelievable, but in those days, the government considered anyone who left the USSR a traitor whose name should disap-

pear forever from the pages of the national press. It goes without saying that this weapon harks back to primeval magic: cursing someone's name. This technique was known to the ancient Romans as *damnatio memoriae* – a curse on one's memory – when the offending name was scratched from the stone *stelae* bearing the text of state documents. As described by Orwell, this phenomenon was familiar to the older generation of Soviet citizens, who had clear memories of photographs being doctored and entire pages of history textbooks being erased, and the Great Soviet Encyclopedia replacing biography by geography: instead of the article on Beria they inserted one on the Bering Strait. To this day, I have a copy of a sports journal, published in Leningrad, that reports on a three-way tie for the 1973 Dutch championship between Enklaar and Zuidema.

Six months after my match against Euwe, the Soviet functionaries had to deal with this same problem, but on a considerably larger scale: in the summer of 1976, after the IBM tournament in Amsterdam, Viktor Kortchnoi applied for political asylum in Holland. It was anything but an impulsive decision. In January of that year, at the tournament in Hastings, Kortchnoi and I had spent nearly every evening weighing every possible means for him to defect to the West.

At the opening of that tournament he asked me to help him talk to Euwe. The conversation boiled down to the following: Kortchnoi had many problems in the Soviet Union; his position there was compromised; soon the Candidates' matches would begin, in which he would participate; so what if...

Euwe understood at once. 'Viktor', he said, 'it goes without saying that you will retain all your rights. We will help you, don't worry', and so forth. I translated emotionlessly, understanding the importance of what was happening. It would be wrong to say that this conversation sealed Kortchnoi's decision – it had been a long time in the making – but there can be no doubt that Euwe's friendly, encouraging tone hardened his resolve.

During the course of the conversation, I occasionally glanced at Euwe. He spoke like a man asked for aid and counsel by a colleague: everything he said was spontaneous, that first outpouring of the soul which Talleyrand so cautioned young diplomats against. There was