



Najdorf x Najdorf

by Liliana Najdorf

Foreword and
Selected Annotated Games
by Jan Timman

208 pages

SRP: \$24.95

**“Chess, easy game!”
– Miguel el Grande**

Among major chess figures of the 20th century, few stand out more than Miguel Najdorf. One of the world’s best players for decades, he was also one of the most active and colorful. And his life, both at the chessboard and away from it, was rich in experience, both joyful and deeply painful.

In this biography, Najdorf’s daughter Liliana paints an intimate portrait of her larger-than life father. She writes about him, warts and all, showing us her father as a man both greatly talented and deeply flawed, a man at once loving and rage-prone, noble and petty, generous and selfish, jovial but despotic, earthy but vain, exuberant yet deeply sad. A genius who could conduct 40 blindfold games simultaneously and memorize long strings of random numbers, yet forgot where he parked his car.

For the English-language edition, Dutch grandmaster Jan Timman has prepared a selection of annotated games and an in-depth foreword. These are complemented nicely by several historical essays, while many photographs round out this engrossing biography of one of the world’s most fascinating chessplayers of the 20th century.

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2016

Russell Enterprises, Inc.
Milford, CT USA

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ISBN: 978-1-941270-39-4 (print)
ISBN: 978-1-941270-40-0 (eBook)

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Published by:
Russell Enterprises, Inc.
P.O. Box 3131
Milford, CT 06460 USA

<http://www.russell-enterprises.com>
info@russell-enterprises.com

Cover design by Janel Norris
Translated from the Spanish by and special thanks to Taylor Kingston

Printed in the United States of America



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Chapter Three

In 1924 my father was fourteen years old, and one afternoon after getting out of school, he visited the house of his classmate Ruben Fridelbaum. He was received by his friend's father, a violinist with the Warsaw Philharmonic, who told him Ruben had gone to the pharmacy to buy some medicine. The man was down with the flu and terribly bored. While they waited for his son to return, he asked if he knew how to play chess. My father said no, and the violinist replied brusquely "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? An intelligent boy cannot be so ignorant. Sit down at the board and I'll teach you." Courtesy demanded that my father accept.

He was told the names of the pieces, the movements and values of each, and they played a few games. My father left full of enthusiasm and bought a French chess book to keep studying. By the next week he was giving his erstwhile teacher rook odds.

At the age of eighteen he played in his first Polish National Tournament, placing fifth and winning all three of the brilliancy prizes.*

In 1930, in a tournament in Warsaw, he played against Glücsberg the game which Tartakower dubbed "The Polish Immortal" and which later was known more correctly and justly as "The Najdorf Immortal."

"In the Najdorf Immortal I saw fourteen moves ahead, but sometimes the immortals are much simpler than positional games, even though the latter do not garner such fame."

Those were splendid years for Polish chess. The level of competition was very high, and they vied for supremacy against Germany, the USA, Hungary, Sweden and Czechoslovakia among other chess powers

In 1934 my father won the title of Warsaw City Champion. This first triumph filled him with pride. Other Polish chessplayers now respected him, and feared when they had to face him at the board.

*Najdorf turned 18 on 15 April 1928. There was no Polish national championship in the twelve months after that, and Najdorf did not play in one until 1935. Per the authoritative *Najdorf: Life and Games* by Lissowski and Mikhalchishin (Batsford 2005), his tournament results around age 18 consisted of =8-9th in the 1928 Łódź championship and 1st in a Warsaw "second class tournament."

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Once he discovered chess he never gave up the game. His passion for it led him to neglect his studies, and this led to a standing quarrel with his mother, who burned his board and pieces in the fireplace despite his insistence that he wanted to make chess his profession. “Daisies will grow out of the palm of my hand before you ever get anywhere with this foolishness,” she shot back.

Many years later he would repeat that sentence to my sister and me when we began our schooling. “I’ll be growing daisies in the palm of my hand before you learn anything,” he told me. For him his mother’s words were a challenge and stimulus, but I on the other hand took it as showing his lack of confidence in us. In the final analysis, both mother and son were mistaken, and the only daisies growing were the ones potted on the balconies.

He became one of several Jewish players to represent Poland. In 1936 he participated with the national team in the Munich Olympiad, and four of his teammates were Jewish.

“Twenty-one nations were competing. Germany was under Hitler’s rule, and persecuted Jews were fleeing to other countries. Given the circumstances, I and other sportsmen refused to participate. At that time, despite being 26 years old, I was in military service. The president of the Chess Federation was Bronislaw Pilsudski, brother of Marshall Josef Pilsudski. In the face of my refusal to go to the Olympiad he called me in and asked ‘Are you a Pole or a Jew?’ I answered ‘A Pole of the Jewish religion.’ To which he replied ‘We need you to participate in the Olympiad in Germany not as a Jew, but as a Pole. Every man must defend his country with the weapons at his disposal. It is important that Poland finish first or second to maintain our international prestige.’ He considered it my obligation to relent and take part in the Olympiad. This made my wife and friends angry with me; they felt I had betrayed the cause of our people. They did not understand that I was obligated to do it. I redeemed myself in their eyes when Poland took second place and I was awarded the gold medal [*for the best score on board two*]. At that moment the Germans had to play the Polish national anthem and one of their top officials called out ‘Moishe Mendel Najdorf, gold medal, first prize.’ It was given to me by Hans Frank, who three years later, as Governor General of Poland, would be directly responsible for the extermination of my entire family.”

That same year he shared first place in a tournament at Budapest, thus beginning his professional international career.

When my father was twenty-four years old a friend invited him to hear a piano recital. Yanek was an accountant, a bit older, and about to marry Genia, who that night performed Chopin’s études at Warsaw’s Winter Palace. He wanted to introduce his sweetheart to the chess champion friend he had told her so much about. As it turned out, for him this was not a good idea: Genia and my father fell in love at this first meeting.

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Even though her wedding date with Yanek was very near, Genia broke off her engagement and announced her decision to marry my father. This was a scandal, especially for her family, who refused to accept this new son-in-law, who, while moderately famous as a chessplayer, was to them still a Bohemian with a strange line of work. Very different from the spurned suitor who was not only the one to whom she had been promised since childhood, but also an excellent match. They opposed her and forbade her to see my father.

The couple therefore decided to escape: they would rent a small apartment and live there, until such time as her family reconsidered their opposition and agreed to the marriage so that they would not have a daughter living in sin. Even so they had to wait because of my father's military service obligation, which had been deferred by his request to continue his studies.

I always loved this part of their story. They seemed brave and romantic to rebel against the strictures of the time, and I would ask my father to tell it to me



My father and Genia, his first wife.

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time and time again. Often the story would be interrupted by his distress at the recollection, and I would feel guilty for causing it. However, I was able to use this episode when I was twenty and he did not agree with my choice of marriage partner.

Carlos was the first man I fell in love with. I was fourteen. He looked just like Jean-Paul Belmondo (for whom I pined), and he seemed different from everyone else I knew. He came from a different economic and social level, and was not Jewish. In retrospect, though, I think the quality that attracted me most was that my choice of him horrified my father.

And so with my romance began a battle between my father and me. He would make it hard for us to see each other, he sent me away to separate us, he restricted my hours of coming and going, he harassed me every time we spoke, explaining the reasons he opposed us. The only result was that after each fight I would feel more and more important, more strongly in favor of the differences and more determined to show he could not impose his will on me.

But after six years of fighting, my rebelliousness was getting exhausted, and furthermore I wanted to get married. I decided to visit my father at his office, where we always had our important talks. "You're doing the same thing to me that Genia's parents did to you," I said, not caring if this would bring up sad memories. "It could be that I'm making a mistake, but that's the way it is, let me make my own mistakes."

He listened to me in silence, his thumb under his chin, his index finger extended, and the rest of his right hand covering his mouth, just as he did when analyzing a chess game.

"You are right," he finally said.

He ended his opposition, agreed to our marriage, helped us out financially, and also gave his consent on the official registration, since I was a minor and could not legally marry without his consent.

He did not neglect to remind me again and again of that conversation in his office when, many years later, I decided to get a divorce.