

TEAM TAL: AN INSIDE STORY

Valentin Kirillov

Team Tal: An Inside Story

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Foreword to the English edition
by **Alexei Shirov**, publisher of the Russian original

Carpe diem

Valentin...Valentin Fedorovich...when we started translating your work into English you were still alive. I thought you would see it come out but...we are all mortals...and now I can only express my belated gratitude for sharing your memories with us.

I first met Valentin Kirillov shortly after I began playing chess. His job was titled “state coach”, making him responsible for selecting players for the Latvian national teams, and he was acutely aware of all chess activities in the country. He quickly noticed me, partly because he knew my father from junior competitions.

In January 1984, at the tender age of eleven years old, I joined Alexander Shabalov and Vidvuds Ozolins in the Soviet Under 18 Championship held in distant Kirovabad (now Ganja) in Azerbaijan. Kirillov was the head of the Latvian delegation, and I had no personal coach at the time. My openings were awful, my opponents were much older and far more experienced, and so no wonder I started out with 0.5 out of 5. Kirillov had to act as both psychologist and coach. His opening knowledge was not exactly up to date, but he still showed me some reasonable lines combined with the words “then think for yourself.” I managed to score 5 points in the remaining 6 rounds, and my first big Soviet competition (won by Alexander Khalifman) went from disastrous to reasonably successful.

I was already 15 by autumn 1987 and still not a Soviet master, which kind of irritated me, as I was lagging behind great champions, especially Fischer and Kasparov. So when I went to play at the “Trade Unions” Championship (the Trade Unions Sports Department was supposed to be the biggest in the USSR,

but, in fact, a lot of the players were also in the army), I needed to win the title at all cost. I was being coached by Vladimir Bagirov at that time, but for some reason he was unable to accompany me, and there was no Skype training in those days—so it was Kirillov who finally joined me in Tyumen (Siberia, Russia, still the USSR). We were together all the time on that trip. Kirillov knew I needed to prepare seriously for the games, and he did what he could—looking for interesting ideas in the latest chess magazines and suggesting what could be worth trying. The rest of the time we talked about everything—and, of course, about Mikhail Tal, too. I managed to score my master norm.

From what I have written, the reader might come away with the impression that Valentin was an “unprofessional” coach, and in a way that was half true in the context of the eighties. A good friend and a good psychologist, but maybe not the best opening helper. Although in the days when he worked with Tal he was definitely more up to date. Unfortunately, their collaboration ended in 1976, when Tal lost that famous game against Lajos Portisch at the Varese Interzonal Playoff and failed to qualify for the candidates rounds. Kirillov wanted Tal to play a solid opening (Tal just needed a draw as White), logically thinking that the Najdorf Poisoned Pawn would give Portisch what he needed—a complex game with double-edged chances. However, Tal couldn’t change his spots so easily, so he sacrificed the pawn and was eventually outplayed. Not the best news for Soviet officials, who immediately looked for a scapegoat and in the end bestowed that “honor” on Kirillov.

Mikhail Tal. Just about everything has been said about our chess legend, and all his important games have been analyzed. I am not sure I can add anything myself, even though all my encounters with Tal in the eighties were quite special events. Meeting him for the first time in 1983 (something that I describe in my book). Playing in a simul against him during a training session in Jurmala.

Playing a consultation game with him on the team. Listening to him talk, trying and trying to understand his chess genius. All that still in 1983. Then, several years later, again in Jurmala, working to help him prepare for Interzonals, trying to share my modest ideas with him. And listening to his genius once again. Because of our age gap, we never became friends as such, but Tal was always my biggest source of inspiration in chess. Still not enough to share in a book of personal memories like the one Valentin Kirillov has written.

Despite his duties as the administrator of the Latvian team, Kirillov devoted most of his time to journalism. His articles were mainly published in a leading Latvian chess magazine (in which he also translated many texts from Latvian to Russian) and in a number of newspapers. A lot of his materials were, of course, jointly produced with Tal. Kirillov wasn't exactly a chess historian, but he had that unique ability to capture the moment—so a day later one would think of that same moment as an important piece of history!

It's a pity that my idea to ask Kirillov to write a book with his memories came a little too late—when he was already in poor health. Yet he has still created a new portrait of Tal (and his Latvian contemporaries)—a portrait as WE knew him. And I hope that all Tal's followers, admirers of his chess legacy, will find something interesting in this unique work.

No Tal anymore, no Vitolins, no Gipslis, no Bagirov, no Klovans, no Koblencs, no Kirillov...but Latvian chess lives on!

*The game and torture
Of achieved triumph
Is like the drawn string
Of a taut bow.*

Boris Pasternak



From the author

The book you're holding is about Mikhail Tal, my friend since the 1950s, whom I assisted as a second from 1968 through 1976, and those who worked with him through good times and bad. This book chronicles the tournaments and events involving Tal that I personally witnessed or learned about through first-hand accounts. Readers will meet Tal's mentors and opponents, discover some unknown facts as well as funny stories about him, and accept or reject numerous opinions and theories—including my own—about the Magician of Riga. Hardly any games or diagrams have made it into this book, mostly because in this day and age, all of Tal's gems are just a few mouse clicks away.

Don't be too hard on the author. Just remember what they used to say at soccer games in South America: "don't shoot the players—they're doing the best they can."

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CHAPTER 1

I get a call early in the morning. The Maestro—that’s the title we bestowed upon Alexander Koblencs—sounds unusually faint. “Misha’s¹ dead, Valentin.” That’s how my day started on June 29th, 1992. Then some other people called, and I made a few calls, too.

Tal hadn’t been in Riga for a while, as his family was living in Germany at the time, but we knew he was in Moscow, undergoing treatment, yet again. We’d heard that his friends had managed to remove him from his hospital bed and bring him to a blitz tournament, where he came in third, even winning a game off Garry Kasparov. Later on, they told us how they were trying to cheer him up on the car ride back to the hospital: “don’t you worry, Misha. You’ve been through much worse. You’ll be out in no time.” He replied, “no, now I’m never getting out.”

Shortly thereafter, I got a call from the editor’s office at *Panorama Latvii* (“*Panorama of Latvia*”) and was asked to write an obituary, which was eventually reprinted in *Baltiiskie Shakhmaty* (“*Baltic Chess*”).

In memory of a friend

Mikhail Tal: An Unsolved Mystery

Mikhail Tal’s no longer with us. It just doesn’t make sense. My heart simply won’t accept it.

¹ “Misha” is a diminutive form of Mikhail, like “Mike” or “Mickey”. The version “Mikh”, also encountered in this book, is a colloquial form that would be heard in the school yard or used by very close friends

Various ailments plagued him, clipping his wings and bringing him down onto this wicked earth, but he'd take flight again and again and flutter from city to city, from country to country, and from tournament to tournament—his style always spectacular, clever, and mesmerizing.

This time around, he didn't take flight—or land, for that matter—he died mid-flight. Severely ill, he continued to participate in tournaments in Germany, Spain, and Russia, while preparing to play for the Latvian national team at the upcoming Chess Olympiad. Alas, it was not to be.

Ex-world champion, eight-time Olympic champion, six-time European champion, six-time gold medalist at USSR championships, first ever world blitz champion, and winner of numerous international tournaments—one can't help but marvel at such an impressive list of accomplishments.

He was a witty journalist and commentator, the author of spectacular books and articles, a wonderfully versatile lecturer and simultaneous exhibition player who travelled to the ends of the earth—playing in community centers, down in coal mines, and on ships—to promote the game. There are hardly any other chess giants who did so much for their beloved art. He was a true gentleman and true knight at the board who wielded immense authority; conflicting parties residing in our tumultuous and strife-ridden chess kingdom would always heed his advice.

A simple, unmaterialistic, down-to-earth guy, an epicure, and a loyal friend who was always willing to help you out in a jam—all those epithets apply to Tal. But do all these descriptions reveal the secret of his incredible charm? What was it about him that people responded to? Back in the day, he was an example for all the young people out there; his style screamed, “be bold, guys, just go for it!” Was that his secret? In the beautiful and fierce world of chess, he sought out the beautiful, shying away from fads and new-fangled

schools of thought. Maybe that was his secret? Or maybe it was the way he was viscerally repelled by banality, clichés, and following all the rules, both at the board and in life?

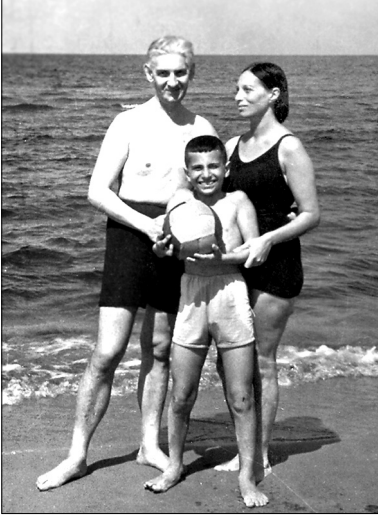
We arrived at the Jewish Community Center in Riga to say our goodbyes to Tal. Grandmasters, top-ranking officials from the Latvian Chess Federation, and public figures (including Mavriks Vulfsons, the Latvian politician and intellectual) walked in his honor guard, while only one member of the government, Janis Jurkans, the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, joined them. Tal was buried at Riga's Jewish Cemetery in the Smerlis Forest, alongside his mother, father, brother, and uncle. His first wife, Sally Landau, erected a headstone on his grave a few years later. Unfortunately, it lists the date of his death incorrectly—it's one day off.

Blessed is he, who in youth was young¹

The meandering Daugava, along with all of its many tributaries and backwaters, green islands, and sandy banks, is forever etched in my memory. There was a creaky wooden footbridge leading over to the opposite bank—to Rabbit Island or just Rabbit, for short—where we'd play soccer. We'd put down clothes or backpacks as goal posts.

Misha Tal, my friend from the chess club at the local Pioneers' Palace, wasn't a regular at our soccer games; he was a bit older than us, and by the age of seventeen he'd already enrolled at the university to study languages, participated in a few Latvian championships (a curious fact: college first-years won the

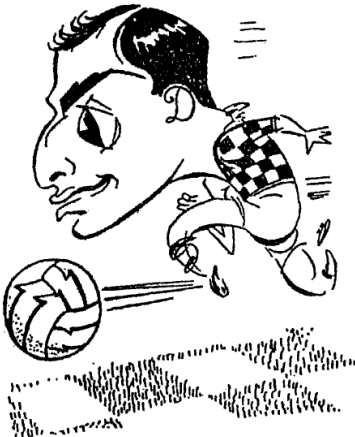
¹ Alexander Pushkin



Latvian championship five years in a row, from 1951 to 1955), played for both the youth and men's national teams, and secured the right to contend for the USSR Master of Sports title. Naturally, he couldn't afford to spend too much time goofing around with a bunch of wacky high-schoolers like us, but sometimes he'd let loose and play some soccer.

Misha, or Mikh as we called him, enjoyed playing goalie, would make impossible saves, courageously charged out to meet attackers, and generally tried to play attractive soccer. He had lightning reflexes; it's no wonder he was also quite good at ping pong. We held countless tournaments at the Officers' House

(we played at the corner of Krisjana Valdemara Street and Kronvalda Boulevard, too, where the Riga Congress Center is now located) and at the Meshchaninov brothers' spacious apartment. Their mother Rosalia, a friend of the Tal family, was a good chess player—she participated in a few Latvian championships—and a skilled typist who worked on a lot of Misha's manuscripts.





Fundamentals, 1953.

Aivars Gipslis, Mikhail Tal

Yes, soccer and ping pong were fun and all, but it was at the chess club that we truly forged our relationship, like when Tal would go for the Belgrade Gambit in the Four Knights Game—he resorted to this opening three times in a qualifying match against Vladimir Saigin. Each time, the experienced master would shy away from the main line, where White sacrifices a central pawn, opting for a more modest, solid continuation. What a terrible disappointment for Tal! It’s as though Saigin knew that we had a whole notebook filled with analysis proving White wins in every line (at least we wanted that to be the case!). We spent countless hours on analysis, and at the end of each session everyone—Azerbaev, Pawel Wojtkiewicz, the father of Aleksandr Wojtkiewicz, the Polish grandmaster, Martinson, and Salat, who were almost all members of the Latvian national youth team—would be given extensive homework. When it came to chess, our tastes didn’t always match, but our pursuit of pure beauty brought us all together.

Once in a while, Tal would come round and spruce up our analysis with brilliant lines he’d come up with on the fly. Whenever our pursuit of beauty would come to an impasse, we’d always turn to him.

I wouldn’t want the reader to think we were hung up on the Belgrade Gambit. Of course not! It was just a phase, albeit a truly

wonderful one. I remember tinkering around with the Old Indian Defense, for Black, when it was just starting to gain popularity. The Chattanooga, which is what we dubbed this system, became part of Tal's opening repertoire and served him well for many years.

Nevertheless, the Belgrade Gambit pretty much symbolized the chess of our youth, our development as players, and the inception of our long-lasting friendship. Much later, when I was getting my start in journalism, *Sahs* ("Chess") printed a little fairy tale I wrote about chess. Here's how it goes.

The Tale of the Young Fellow and Four Horses¹

Who doesn't love fairy tales? Children love fairy tales, and grownups love fairy tales, too. "Read me a fairy tale, granny!" chant little kids everywhere. Alexander Pushkin, a dignified adult who wrote many a tale, once said, "how charming those fairy tales are!" And he'd always beg his nanny to read "just one more!"

I'm not a grandmother, so nobody asks me to read them bedtime stories, but I'm just dying to tell you my own fairy tale, a chess fairy tale!

A long, long time ago, when we were young lads who loved the game of chess, we'd get together at the Pioneers' Palace and go over all sorts of gambits for hours on end. One of them even lived in the Kingdom of Draws, in the land of the Four Horses. Why was it called Four Horses, you may ask? Well, what kind of fairy tale would this be without horses? So, our little gambit went out into the big, wide world.

¹ Knights are known as horses in Russian, hence the author's double-meaning