Genna Remembers

Genna Sosonko

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Figurine symbols

We will not be using letters to denote chess pieces (as these might not be familiar to non-native English speakers) but rather the ‘figurine’ symbols, as follows:

Chess piece	Letter	Figurine
King	K	K
Queen	Q	Q
Rook	R	R
Bishop	B	B
Knight	N	N
Pawn	–	-

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Introduction

Half a century ago I left a country whose red color dominated a large portion of the world map. One way or another, the fate of almost every single person described in this book is forever linked with that now non-existent empire. Many of them ended up beyond its borders too. Cultures and traditions, and certainly not least of all a Soviet mentality, couldn’t have just left them without a trace. Having been transplanted into a different environment, they had to play the role of themselves, apart from certain corrections with regard to the tastes and customs of a new society. Nevertheless, every one of them, both those who left the Soviet Union and those who stayed behind, were forever linked by one common united phenomenon: they all belonged to the Soviet school of chess.

This school of chess was born in the 20’s, but only began to count its true years starting in 1945, when the representatives of the Soviet Union dominated an American squad in a team match. Led by Mikhail Botvinnik, Soviet Grandmasters conquered and ruled the world, save for a short Fischer period, over the course of that same half-century. In chess as well as ballet or music, the word ‘Soviet’ was actually a synonym for the highest quality interpretation of the discipline.

The Soviet Union provided unheard-of conditions for their players, the sort of which their colleagues in the West dared not even dream. Grandmasters and even Masters received a regular salary just for their professional qualifications, thereby raising the prestige of a chess player to what were unbelievable heights. It was a time when any finish in an international tournament, aside from first, was almost considered a failure when it came to Soviet players, and upon their return to Moscow they had to write an official explanation to the Chess Federation or the Sports Committee. The isolation of the country, separated from the rest of the world by an Iron Curtain, was another reason why talent and energy often manifested themselves in relatively neutral fields.

Still, if with music, cinematography, philosophy or history, the Soviet people were raised on a strict diet that contained multiple restrictions, this did not apply to chess. Grandmasters and Masters, all varied in terms of their upbringing, education and mentality, were judged solely on their talent and mastery at the end of the day. Maybe that was why the Soviet school of chess was full of such improbable variety, not only in terms of the style of play of its representatives, but also their different personality types.

The system was built as a gigantic chess pyramid, at the base of which were school championships, which were closely followed by district ones. Later, there were city championships, regions, republics, and finally – the ultimate cherry on top – the national event itself. The Championships of the Soviet Union were in no way inferior to the strongest international tournaments, and collections of the games played there came out as separate publications in the West.

That huge brotherhood of chess contained its very own hierarchy within. Among the millions and multitudes of parishioners – fans of the game – there were the priests – Candidate Masters. Highly respected were the cardinals – Masters. As for Grandmasters, well…they were true gods. Every person in the USSR knew their names, and those names sounded with just as much adoration and admiration as those of the nation's other darlings – the country's best hockey players. In those days, the coming of the American genius only served to strengthen the interest and attention of society towards chess, never mind the fact that by that point it had already been fully saturated by it.

The presence of tons of spectators at a chess tournament in Moscow as shown in the series 'The Queen's Gambit' is in no way an exaggeration; truly shown was the golden age of chess. Under the constant eye and control of the government, chess in the USSR was closely interwoven with politics, much like everything else in that vanished country. Concurrently, the closed and isolated society in which it was born only served to enable its development, creating its very own type of culture – the giant world of Soviet chess.

I was never indifferent to the past. Today, when there is that much more of it than the future, this feeling has become all the sharper. The faster the twentieth century sprints away from us and the thicker the grass of forgetting grows, together with the verified power of the most powerful engines, that world of chess will be gone soon enough as well. It was an intriguing and colorful world, and I saw it as my duty to not let it disappear into that empty abyss.

Genna Sosonko, Amsterdam May 2021.

An Opening of Four Knights and Two Jackasses

After a draw between Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and Sergey Karjakin in a game at Stavanger (2018), Magnus Carlsen claimed that both players actually came to this decision before the game. "I do not do it myself. It's very hard to prevent people from doing it, but it's not the way it should be", added the world champion.

Sergey and Shakh gave pretty dull responses to any inquiries, and the developing controversy regarding the ethical nature of such agreements soon came to naught. The same also happened with other cases, where the discussion broached this very delicate topic. Today it seems impossible to determine when and by whom this widely-known phenomenon was introduced into chess. Who was the person who was the very first to make this offer, then part ways peacefully with his opponent, and later would ratify such an agreement in the actual tournament hall? Who stood behind the noise of that particular time so long gone from us, when the foundations of professional chess were only just being laid? The accent on the word 'professional' isn't a coincidence – after all, the amateur plays exclusively for love of the game, and for him a refusal to do battle before it is nonsense: why even bother sitting down at the board in the first place?

Magnus Carlsen, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and Sergey Karjakin (Tal Memorial Moscow 2013).

Pondering about who it was that initiated this particular phenomenon, the author came to the conclusion that this trophy belonged to one of the most brilliant champions in the history of our game. Even if he himself was ashamed of his chess-related professionalism, instead covering himself with a fig-leaf of diplomatic sinecure, it was he who introduced this phenomenon; and it is to him that the business-like approach towards the game is credited, at the very least in the modern sense of this word. You probably already understand that the discussion revolves around José Raul Capablanca.

Even though the third world champion was born in Cuba and had the temperament of a typical Latino, Capablanca spent his whole conscious life in the United States. His contemporaries, in marveling at the accomplishments of the Cuban, made note of his American business-like efficiency on more than one occasion. This efficiency – obviously in combination with that immense talent – became deadly both for the romantic-era player Efim Bogoljubov, and the philosopher Aron Nimzowitsch. As Capa's regular clients, neither ever won a single game against him!

The 1922 London Tournament was the very first time that Bogoljubov lost to Capablanca. The game between the second-place finisher Alexander Alekhine and

José Raúl Capablanca y Graupera

the world champion meanwhile quickly ended in a draw; the incomplete 17 moves played by the competitors would have generally been of very little interest, were it not for the scandal erupting a few months later. Alekhine was furious with Bogoljubov, who had claimed the game above was never really even played. A month-and-a-half before the start of the New York Tournament of 1924, Alekhine went so far as to demand that the latter be stricken from the list of participants, threatening to decline his invitation if his demand wasn't met. Alekhine declared: "There can be no discussion regarding Bogoljubov's mutual participation and mine; he isn't a gentleman; Bogoljubov is the sort of person from whom you can expect absolutely anything at any time". Strong words, especially when taking into account the fact that the relationship between the two Grandmasters was very reliable – one could even say friendly. So friendly in fact, that in 1921 when Alekhine left the Soviet Union for good, he and Bogoljubov played a training match at Bogoljubov's house in Triberg, Germany. More than likely, Alexander Alexandrovich just happened to tell Efim Dmitriyevich that he and Capablanca had simply agreed to a draw before the game that day. Bogo then told somebody else in turn, and on it went right up until the whole episode came into possession of the press…

The concerned organizers entered into negotiations with the future world champion, and Alekhine had a change of heart in the end (in New York, both his games against Bogoljubov were drawn). I'd also like to point out that at the tournament in London, the one after which this whole mess blew up, Capablanca, then the world champion, was at his peak; whereas Alekhine had only just established himself in the West a year before, and was just trying to settle into a normal life and renew a career (disrupted so abruptly for a period of seven years, initially by

Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine.

the First World War, and later the civil one in Russia). Perched atop his lofty reputation, the Cuban – easily winning that tournament by a point and a half over his nearest competitor – could have offered a draw to practically anybody and with either color before the game. Yet even if the one against Alekhine was indeed a bloodless rarity, it would be clearly impossible to assert that this result was in fact agreed to beforehand. The main point is something else entirely: it's obvious that any sort of discussion, much less agreement between the participants before the game, was considered objectionable in itself. Although fifteen years later, this sort of thing would be looked upon differently.

Andor Lilienthal remembered how before his game with Capablanca at the Moscow Tournament of 1936, he met with the great Cuban in the barbershop of the 'National' hotel, where all the participants resided: " 'What would you like to do today?' Capablanca asked, having already seated himself in the barber chair, 'Do you want a draw?' – 'Very well,' I replied, 'but what shall we play out?' – 'O, that's easy: let's play the Four Knights Game. You'll capture on c6, I'll take on c3'. As you would understand… I played the game without much concentration and quietly found myself in a very uncomfortable position, so much so that it was not all that simple for Capablanca to find a neutral move, especially considering the tournament crowd was actually very very knowledgeable about chess. In the end however, the game did end up being drawn. An opening of 'Four Knights and Two Jackasses', Nikolai Krylenko said, referring to our game, having followed it from inside the hall".

Clearly, it wasn't a secret for the head of Soviet chess how exactly both players had arrived at this result, while Andor Lilienthal for his part, didn't find it all that shameful to discuss, even if he did so decades later. Substantial contributions towards the phenomenon of various agreements and arrangements before games – at times even before whole tournaments! – were made by Soviet players. This occurred at all levels of play.

Speaking of the highest, it is worth mentioning the Candidates Tournament in Budapest in 1950: Boleslavsky, who was in the lead by a full point, was asked by the head of the Soviet delegation, Boris Veinshtein (who was also Bronstein's second!) to make two draws in the final two rounds, so as to give Bronstein a chance at catching the leader; thus, they could later decide which of them would play for the championship against Botvinnik (this is exactly what happened). Let's also remember the next Candidates Tournament in '53, discussed by the very same Bronstein in his article 'Thrown Games in Zurich', which only saw the light of day some fifty years later. There, the Soviet dignitaries, arriving in Zurich alongside their country's participants, led a multi-faceted behind-the-scenes plot to help Vasily Smyslov win.

Let us also not forget the quadruple round-robin Candidates Tournament in Curaçao in 1962, where Petrosian, Geller and Keres concluded each of their 'games' against one another with quick draws, to which they all agreed even before the start of the competition. This gave each of them eight additional rest days, something that given Curaçao's tropical climate must have proved a decisive advantage. It's no small coincidence that all three finished ahead of everybody else. The delicate topic was once even discussed by Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik himself: "I confess: I did make pre-arranged draws – with Lisitsin in 1931, with Flohr in 1933 as well as others – it is impossible to list everything, but I never consciously lost a game to anyone". Noted is the Patriarch's sincere confession here, although the reader must surely be interested in finding out who it was that was hidden behind the words 'as well as others – it is impossible is to list everything'.

Returning to Capablanca, at the Nottingham Tournament (1936) the leaders Botvinnik and Capablanca were neck-and-neck going into the final round. The Soviet champion played with the outsider Winter, while Capablanca played with Bogoljubov. During a mutual stroll, when both of their opponents were thinking about their moves, the Cuban hugged Botvinnik and exclaimed: "You have a good position, and so do I. Let's both go for a draw and share the first-place prize". "Well, here I am thinking, oh you trickster", Botvinnik writes, "Winter is no Bogoljubov… 'As for me, I'm ready to accept your offer of course, but what will Moscow say?' Capablanca only threw up his hands in response".

Obviously, this isn't a pre-arranged draw offer, but it is characteristic in itself of the very approach to the whole business. Remember that the Cuban conducted himself with honor and in a very gentleman-like manner at the board; Botvinnik adds: "There were certain shortcomings in his chess upbringing. I was somewhat shocked when I saw that in lost positions and with his opponent low on time, he would start playing blitz (he himself had enough time on the clock!) in hope of a time-related oversight by his opponent, and he played amazing blitz. How do you criticize that? Therein was his last and only chance!"

The reason why Capablanca's behavior was a shock to Botvinnik probably doesn't make sense to a modern chess player. Especially when considering that Flohr's recollections appear to confirm that the Cuban played for time in any position, and not just lost ones. At the same time, imagining Steinitz or Zukertort playing for time is indeed quite difficult. It's also hard to imagine the very same Steinitz at the Vienna Tournament (1882) going so far as to embrace Winawer in the last round (they shared 1st and 2nd places) with an offer for both to agree to a draw and guarantee themselves a share of the main prize without any additional worries.

Everyone is well aware of what chess was like in the XIX century. Staring at us from those old photographs are respectable gentlemen in three-piece suits and ties. Almost all were doctors, bankers, teachers, lawyers or military; but even regarding the scarce few who were trying to scratch out a living off the game, it is impossible to imagine that they would arrive at the tournament hall just to go through the motions. It would be absolutely *'non comme il faut',* given that social norms and reputation played an undeniably greater role in that era compared to the present one.

There is nothing to even add about earlier times. Can you imagine Philidor or Morphy offering their opponent the option of a pre-arranged draw before the first move of a game is even played? Yet that which was objectionable or maybe even amoral yesterday, and especially the day before yesterday, is now widely-accepted and completely normal in our time. Somebody once told Pal Benko how a young Capablanca agreed to a pre-arranged draw with an unknown player before the game, but wound up winning in the end. Resigning, the player started to cry and complain, but Capa only shrugged his shoulders and said: "How could I have given you a draw, when you played so badly?" I don't know who shared this episode with Benko, and whether or not it belonged to the realm of speculation, but for some reason nobody has shared similar anecdotes about Steinitz or Lasker (for instance); whereas with Capablanca – there you go.

I probably won't be mistaken in contending that: starting with Capablanca, there has not been one world champion (that's without even mentioning us mere mortals) who has not agreed to a draw before the game. "That where the draws were pre-arranged, it happened, I won't deny it…" – from a 2019 interview with Anatoly Karpov. The only exceptions would be Fischer and Carlsen. Obviously, the discussion isn't about short games – they appeared on both the American's record, as well as the Norwegian's; although even here, these were far less often than with other champions. Even so, it's different: no matter how short they were, they were played for real.

* * *

This topic is of course far wider in scope and even transcends the limitless boundaries of chess. In that vein, here are a few additional examples. In Pushkin's day, one critic, upon reading 'Ruslan and Ludmila', found that "it was impossible not to turn red, and look away" when reading the following passage:

On a girl of seventeen
There is no hat which looks obscene
She's never lazy to dress up!
Ludmila twirls the hat instead;
Straight on her brow, one side, then down
And plunks it backwards on her head.

What could possibly serve as the reason for turning red, or looking away here, is today a complete mystery. I even started thinking hard over the last line, trying to find something frivolous there, but gave up on this futile task in the end. In reality, the explanation is very obvious: there were simply other norms and expectations back then, while today there happen to be others. Another example: Isabel Hapgood, Tolstoy's American translator, declined to translate his novella 'The Kreutzer Sonata' (1890) giving the following explanation: "After making due allowance for the ordinary freedom of speech, which has greater latitude in Russia (as elsewhere in Europe) than is customary in America, I find the language of the Kreutzer Sonata to be too excessive in its candor". The explanation is clearly the same: at that time, notions of what was morally permissible were different, especially compared to those in the XXI century.

Returning to chess, it's impossible not to touch upon this phenomenon as it relates to team tournaments, which are themselves a relatively new occurrence. After the first Chess Olympiad (London 1927), Richard Reti wrote that chess competitions had grown to such a degree that would have been previously unimaginable. The Czechoslovakian Grandmaster also felt that in London, the only thing considered were the team points, while the results of individual participants were of no interest to anyone: the competitive element became the dominant factor. He concluded by emphasizing his desire that the London experiment be the last of its kind.

Fifty years later, it became clear just how wrong Reti had been. That first Chess Olympiad wasn't the beginning of the end. Quite the opposite in fact: the Olympiad became one of the major events in the chess world, and the competitive aspect in it, as in all of chess really, now easily prevails over every other one. If in

The start of the USSR-Netherlands match. John van der Wiel is waiting for Anatoly Karpov. Genna Sosonko and Artur Yusupov on board two (Thessaloniki Olympiad 1988).

London there were teams representing 16 countries, in Batumi (2018) they had 180. The rules of the game remained unchanged, but in the Olympiads, there arose elements of competition which would have left both Reti and every other participant of those pre-war ‘tournaments of nations’ in utter and complete shock. The conversation isn’t referring to the checking for electronic devices, but rather a collective agreement to draw. This sort of agreement isn’t just made by the players themselves, but instead by their team captains. Sometimes the clocks have already stopped on two boards, and in many such cases the captains decided to simply conclude the match.

There is precedent for this and for some reason nobody sees anything wrong with it. The author of these very pages, first in representing the Dutch team and later in being its captain, was himself a witness (as well as perpetrator) to these types of agreements multiple times. At the USSR-Netherlands match at the Thessaloniki Olympiad (1988), my game with Artur Yusupov ended in a pretty quick draw. The situation on the rest of the boards (Karpov-Van der Wiel, Beliavsky-Piket, R.Kuijf-Ivanchuk) was unclear, and I told the captain of the Dutch contingent: “What the hell, maybe we should offer draws?” The permission to do so was duly-granted: “they won’t agree, but try…”. The captain of the Soviet team, Sergei Makarichev didn't dare make a responsible decision of this magnitude and instead suggested that we waited for Garry Kasparov, who wasn't playing in that match himself. The world champion appeared in the playing hall some ten minutes later. Having looked over the boards and wrinkling his nose with displeasure, he shook his head and seemingly gave the go-ahead. As the astonished arbiter looked on, all of the clocks were suddenly stopped and the 2:2 result became official.

It would not be fair to think however, that I earned some sort of accolade in the Netherlands over this: even if the chess pundits wrote about a respectable draw against the world's strongest team. Regular journalists, very far removed from chess in general, only bothered to pay attention to the actual method by which this result was achieved, while one of the country's most popular weekly publications even put out a piece with this ominous headline for a title: 'Notice: Corruption!' Anyway, forget about me. It was after all Stalin's prosecutor Roman Andreyevich Rudenko who said it best regarding these particular situations: "The main thing in an investigation is making sure the evidence doesn't lead back to you!"

Kidding aside, in team tournaments this widely-accepted practice is especially common in last round matches. That's why at the Khanty-Mansiysk Olympiad (2010), the captain of the Ukrainian Women's team Vereslav Eingorn was criticized for "blundering an opportunity to secure draws in a match with the Chinese team" – a decision which cost the Ukrainian women their medals. One of many recent examples: "A draw in the match would have guaranteed the Indian squad a podium finish, and they even offered it at one point, but we decided to play on" – the phrase comes from an interview with Ian Nepomniachtchi and refers to the last round of the World Team Championships (Astana 2019). Such offers have long become standard elements of team competition and nobody bothers to ask whether such an agreement is even ethical (the exception being the author of the article 'Notice: Corruption!' – a Dutch journalist, who probably only learned of this not long before writing his piece).

Sometimes, especially at the end of an event, the captains come to this agreement not just during, but *before* the round as well. All of this is actually an open secret, and statements akin to "we lost any opportunity to finish in the top five" and "our opponents had no basis to decline the offer" only serve as a sort of euphemism: everyone understands what the author means, when he writes about a match in which all the games end in draws after just thirty minutes.

* * *

It's pretty obvious that both in individual as well as in team events, the prearranged draw will end up sticking around for the future. The explanation for it is clear as day. It was even discussed by the poet Boris Pasternak, albeit for a completely different reason:

And this is where all art has ended
And soil and fate must breathe instead.

I don't know about the soil or fate, but breathing deeply here is a simple and harsh reality of life. Nowadays this reality leaves manners and conventions in the dust. After all in Ilf and Petrov's novel '12 Chairs', the main hero couldn't offer anything in rebuttal to the ironclad logic of: "Agreement is the only product of complete non-resistance by either side". Exactly the situation here. If both sides came to such an agreement, nothing and no one could stop them. If this is the case, our conclusion is clear: it is simply necessary, and without any additional inconvenience, to accept this phenomenon, and agree that it is now just one of the components of our game. A game which has become a sport, but isn't completely one in the end (if only because of this very phenomenon which is punished quite harshly in other types of sporting events).

Is it possible to name any sort of competition where in the most important cycle of the world championship, the Women's Candidates Tournament, two games would in point of fact not be played at all, and all of the participants, arbiters and viewers – absolutely everyone – would know about the outcome of these particular games beforehand? I'm referring to the Muzychuk sisters, Mariya and Anna, who never play against one another, but who, from time to time, do vary the method by which they achieve their well-known result. This isn't spoken from a position of judgement (God forbid!) but only and exclusively as a statement of fact. And any reservations regarding what persistent journalists will write about it should be pushed down somewhere towards the back of consciousness. Compared to the good old days, notions such as 'what will people think' and 'what will they say' have now in chess, as in life on the whole, scattered significantly and very little of these now remain as a result.

Today, the outcome and success itself are paramount: like war, these trump everything. So, they'll assume something; so, they'll criticize the game if it's too short and brutally obvious, but so what? The only thing that shouldn't be done is to take on a defensive posture at any hint of criticism and then resort to the oft-favored argument made by many Russian politicians: "Well you just go ahead and prove it!" Acting this way, the advocates for either side that has played such a game do a great disservice to their clients: they agree to the criminalization of an act that is accepted by everyone in modern-day chess.

8

Everybody’s Favorite Uncle

The day’s major headline “Did Pagel Pay Dutch Chess Players under the Table?” left many members of the King’s Club in a state of utter dejection. A whole spread showing off the Grandmasters and Masters alike was published on January 11th, 1986 in *‘De Telegraaf’*, the largest newspaper in the Netherlands.

The players were suspected of receiving large sums of money from the club’s owner and the ‘king of concrete’, Arnfried Pagel, who had just been arrested. The payments, which weren’t disclosed in tax filings, varied, as the paper reported, from as little as a few hundred guilders per game, to as much as tens of thousands. A representative of the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration made it abundantly clear: “We aren’t just interested in the total amount of Mr. Pagel’s income. The documentation of the King’s Club doesn’t contain so much as a hint regarding any sort of payments to the chess players. Nevertheless, it’s pretty clear that over the course of seven years they did receive substantial sums of money”.

Arnfried Gunter Dagobert Pagel, a German by birth, settled in the Dutch town of Bergen at the end of the seventies. He was the owner of a few concrete plants located in the south of Germany, and the concrete they produced was aptly named ‘Pagel Concrete’.

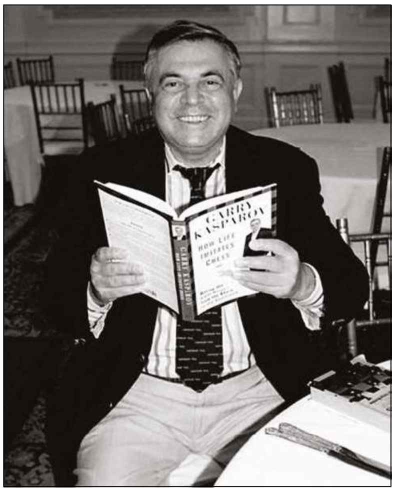
Besides the fact that this concrete was widely used in construction, it was also useful in the building of fall-out shelters. His shelters were absolutely airtight, with fresh air constantly pumped in by special mechanisms, and enough food and water to last for quite a while. Despite the significant cost of the bunker, three hundred thousand deutsche marks, the installation sold fairly well; the threat of a Soviet nuclear strike was, at the very least according to the buyers, absolutely real. The bomb shelter which belonged to Pagel himself had a wine cellar; the owner fairly noted that, even during a nuclear war, one shouldn't neglect his glass or two of fine wine. As to the question of the automatic weapons hanging on the walls near the entrance to the bunker, Pagel replied that in case of ensuing chaos which usually occurred as a result of a nuclear blast, there could be plenty of people making a break for the bunker, which was why such measures of self-defense could prove useful.

The interests of the king of concrete weren't just limited to business; Arnfried Pagel was a big fan of chess. A player of a solid, positional style, and somewhere in the neighborhood of a 1700 FIDE rating, he did take part in a few of the lower tournament groups of the Wijk aan Zee chess festival, though without any particular success.

Having settled in Bergen, he began visiting the local chess club of that small Dutch town. The club's secretary remembers that Pagel never acknowledged defeat – if his position was completely lost, he would go to the bar and remain there until he lost the game on time. In offhand or blitz games, he would calmly make a move even after his opponent had checkmated him.

When he wasn't added to the roster of the club's team, and having quarreled with the other members, he decided to start his own club instead. He dubbed it with the ringing moniker 'King's Club'. Pagel registered the club with the Dutch Chess Federation and set his sights on winning the National Team Championship the very next year. "We'll wipe everybody else off the face of the earth", Pagel announced.

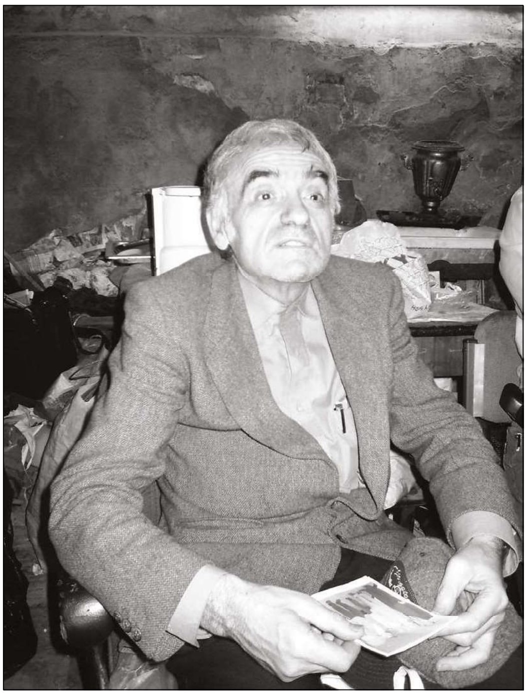
In reality, things weren't that simple. He was politely informed that doing so right away was impossible, and that he must first conquer the regional league, and only after climbing rung by rung, could he reach the top division where the championship was actually contested. The whole path would take a minimum of seven years, provided of course, that his team won one division each year. "Excellent," Pagel said, "I'm in no hurry". The King's Club attended their first match in automobiles under the direction of the Admiral himself. On the way there, it was discovered that they were lacking in manpower: there was nobody to put on the last board. "Can you play chess?" was the unexpected question with which Pagel startled their driver. It's now difficult to determine how the game of the newest member of the King's Club went, but Pagel's team did win that first match. Pagel decided against such unnecessary risks going forward, and left nothing to chance. He placed an ad in one of the chess magazines to which a few players of Candidate Master strength responded; they formed the core of the King's Club. The biggest impression, if based purely on the style of his victories, was made by the recently arrived Argentine native, Hebert Perez Garcia, who had settled in the Netherlands and had a rating which was not much higher than 2200. In Pagel's eyes, he was a Grandmaster.


Lev Alburt was the very first grandmaster who was willing to defend the colors of the Kings Club.

The first real Grandmaster who began playing for the King's Club was Lev Alburt. He met Pagel in January of 1980 during the farewell dinner at the closing ceremony of the tournament in Wijk aan Zee. On the napkin next to the usual plate of split-pea soup – a tradition which began in that most difficult time of World War Two – Pagel personally wrote out the stipulations of a contract, which guaranteed a payout of 2000 dollars per game and did not include any additional expenses. This sum far exceeded a Grandmaster's purse in the top league of the Dutch championship and was approximately the same as first prize in a fairly decent international tournament. Even though there were plenty of rumors floating around about him, and Pagel did seem like a strange fellow to Alburt's mind, the offer was far too tempting to refuse. The plane from New York usually arrived quite early. A Mercedes-Benz and driver waited for the Grandmaster at the airport, and a few hours later he would already be sitting in some small-town café playing a game against an amateur, who didn't always know the rules, and who would constantly forget to press the clock after making his move. Often the game wouldn't go past the first dozen moves. This wasn't particularly surprising: the playing strength of Alburt's opponents barely corresponded to a 1200 rating level… their skill level only developed some years later, even if the difference in class would have still been significant. Following in Alburt's footsteps, the colors of the King's Club would soon be defended by other Grandmasters as well – the Pole Adam Kuligowski, Jacob Murey from Israel, the Americans: Dimitri Gurevich, Sergey Kudrin, Leonid Shamkovich, and Lev Gutman from Germany. At times, the King's Club would surrender either a half or whole point on the last board, since it was usually occupied by some local, even though the majority of their matches were won with a perfect score.

There wasn't anything surprising here either: the opponents of the amateurs who showed up to play a game for their own pleasure on any given Saturday, were experienced professionals who were flown in from New York, Chicago, and Warsaw. When inviting these GMs to Holland, Pagel often warned them: "Remember – your last name is Jansen or Dijkstra". Given that not all of the Grandmasters were in the pre-match roster, the Chess Federation was just waiting to catch Pagel in violation of just about anything. More than likely, the Commodore was simply entertained by the notion of Grandmaster Shamkovich pulling his hat all the way down to his eyebrows, and using a fake voice to introduce himself as "Witterbrod" to his unsuspecting opponent. The amateurs who rarely made it out of the opening without incurring major material deficits, didn't even bother to ask why these people with typical Dutch surnames only spoke English, all while avoiding the use of *'the'* article of grammar at that! He was the producer of, and sole director in his own personal theater, with the company of actors who were working for him agreeing to any role with which they were presented – the possibilities for professional chess players at those (pretty much like any other) times were extremely limited.

As for the performers, it didn't matter what was in the very soul of the impresario of their theater – they were only interested in that which was beyond it, namely that particular sum of money which he was willing to pay them. Engagements of this kind weren't offered by anybody else, and one can only guess how they would have responded if similar offers were made by other such theaters.



Jacob Murey, a Grandmaster from Israel, also played a couple of games for Pagel's club during its early years..

I don't believe Pagel ever really questioned whether he was overpaying his foreign legion; I suspect he didn't especially care. It simply amused him, like the Merchant of Venice in his day, to send ripples across the waves with his gold and silver coins. Nevertheless, and regardless of what goals Pagel pursued, he enjoyed socializing with those who attained that highest of chess titles. The very word 'Grandmaster' sounded divine to him. Of course, the period of time during which Pagel treated the GM title with holy trepidation didn't last long, and soon his initial impression of Grandmasters as people from another planet ended up being unsubstantiated, although that's not to say it wasn't confirmed at all.

It's hard to say who started referring to Pagel as 'Uncle' first. It was probably one of the American Grandmasters of Russian origin who played for the King's Club. The name stuck, and in conversation amongst themselves that was how everybody started referring to him. Even though everybody's favorite Uncle was well aware of this, when speaking with him directly, obviously everybody called him "Mr. Pagel". He himself never resorted to familiarities, referring to his warriors as "Mr. Alburt", "Mr. Gurevich" or "Mr. Kuligowski". Those who assumed that proper interaction and a smile in Uncle's direction guaranteed them a spot on the team were wrong.

"A very pleasant gentleman is that Grandmaster Shamkovich, but he just won't do in blitz…" was Pagel's unforgiving verdict after the National Blitz Team Championship in Beverwijk. Shamkovich lost a few games at the event and Pagel never invited him to Holland again. In Beverwijk, the King's Club was represented by two teams, and before their match against each other, the members of both received instructions from their Uncle, who personally determined the result. Pagel decided to put together a second team, when the number of chess players willing to compete for the King's Club (for obvious reasons) started to exceed the number of available boards. Team one continued to crush the opposition, taking first place in their respective league each time; team two began its successful climb to the top from a much lower rung on the ladder. “I want the King’s Club to compete in every league. Team one will win the Dutch championship in a few years, and then the European Cup, while the others will dominate all the other leagues”, Pagel said, sharing his long-term plans.

There was quite a debate at the Royal Chess Federation of the Netherlands regarding whether or not to allow the King’s Club to field a second team to compete in one of the lower leagues. Pagel’s regularly circulated letter had this to say on the matter: “Those Calvinists, in concluding their deal with the devil, wanted us to betray our second team and relinquish our plans, but when the very question was put to a vote, we won. Who voted against?” What followed was a list of clubs, and a logical conclusion: “They themselves are begging for our King’s Club to crush them!”

Pagel didn’t like it when games ended in a draw without his prior knowledge. In such cases, he felt that he was simply being lied to, and the one who made the draw (let alone anyone who dared to lose a game) was sure to find himself on last board next time. He once prohibited Master Robbie Hartoch, who had played for the King’s Club pretty much from inception, from making a draw. “What do you mean it’s a drawn position? You need to put the bishop there, then afterwards, the knight to the neighboring square, and it’s a done deal…”, his beloved Uncle explained. It is relevant to note of course, that by that point the match had already been won in dominant fashion, and the result of Hartoch’s game had absolutely no bearing on anything. The game continued until some moves later, when the Master’s opponent captured *en passant* and put his pawn on the square where the other had just been; Pagel immediately claimed: “The game is lost, given an illegal move was just made”, and it took the tournament director every ounce of strength to calm him.

Matches involving the King’s Club had a reputation of being extra challenging according to many of the tournament directors. On another occasion, Hartoch, having a habit of going to bed way past midnight, was late in arriving for his game in Bergen which was set to begin at 1 pm. They placed a call to Amsterdam and Robbie immediately grabbed a taxi, but the drive to Bergen would take approximately forty-five minutes. When the car drove up to the playing hall and Hartoch jumped out, the flag on his clock had just started to creep upwards, and everybody, abandoning their own games, started staring out the window just to see how Hartoch’s race against the clock would end. When the flag was already horizontal, Pagel, in order to stave off that which was already unavoidable by that point, moved the rook pawn two squares and loudly hit the clock. The shocked arbiter returned the pawn to its original spot and continued letting Hartoch’s clock run. The flag fell at approximately the same exact moment when the out-of-breath Robbie Hartoch finally set foot inside the room.

It should be noted that despite his solid manner of play, Pagel would sometimes open his games with a move of either rook pawn jumping forward two squares: the opening didn't matter he presumed, but an enterprising game on the other hand could always turn the tide in his direction. He once had the opportunity to play a few offhand games against Bobby Fischer. He played 1.h4, and 1.a4 against him a couple of times as well. Even though the Uncle later confided that he managed to win one of those games, his secretary, also present at the meeting, never confirmed it. According to him, Fischer treated the games seriously and beat his Uncle mercilessly, and when Pagel tried to cheat, moving a piece to a different square, Fischer didn't get the joke and immediately stated that he could replay the game from memory starting from the very first move.

Sometimes, sensing that things were headed for a draw on one board, Pagel resorted to drastic measures: he would suggest that the player on the opposing team resign the game, unambiguously reaching into his pocket… Some couldn't overcome the temptation, others refused. Somebody even complained to the federation and Pagel was told that such behavior would not be tolerated.

In one match against a club of local amateurs, when the 'Pagelites' were still playing in the provincial league, they won, as they usually did, with a perfect score. There was only one game left, even if the outcome was no longer in doubt – the Polish GM Adam Kuligowski had already achieved a won position by that point. The game was approaching move forty, after which, as according to the rules of the time, it would have to be adjourned and completed one week later. Approaching Kuligowski's opponent, Pagel took out a 100 guilder note and offered it on condition that the player stopped his completely futile resistance; the dinner, dedicated to the latest victory of the King's Club, had already been served. Furthermore, Kuligowski had to fly out the very next day as he was participating in some Open tournament in the United States and simply couldn't be present for the conclusion of the game a week later. His opponent was well aware of this circumstance, and the desire to refuse the widely reviled 'king of concrete' triumphed over his much baser material instincts. "Come now, don't be stupid…", everybody's favorite Uncle admonished the man, adding another 100 guilders to the first such note, even though the player still didn't concede. Kuligowski flew out the very next day, and to everybody's surprise flew back to Bergen from the United States a week later. Despite the fact that the Polish Grandmaster's opponent resigned the adjourned game without playing it out after all, Pagel triumphed, while the story itself appeared on the pages of most Dutch newspapers.