



top: Capablanca and Olga in 1938.

above: Capablanca in a simul around 1910

left: José Raúl Capablanca y Graupera.

below: 6 May 1984. The author's first meeting with Olga at the Manhattan Chess Club.



A Great Teacher Inspires

I was 12 years old when I first went to the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace. There were many who wanted to learn chess, and in order to select the best, the trainers used to give simultaneous displays. It was then that for the first time I saw Vladimir Grigoryevich Zak.

Our game did not last long: after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 I replied 2...Nc6. Zak asked how old I was, and whether I knew how Black should play in this position. Instead of replying, I made a gesture suggesting that he should continue the game. Naturally I did not pass the selection test, and it was only from the following year that I began studying chess at the Pioneers' Palace. From that period there remains in my memory a stern man with striking, Assyrian facial features, and with staring, unblinking dark eyes, and a constant flexing of his jaw muscles, especially during analysis when he was considering a position.

The Chess Club of the Pioneers' Palace was in the splendid, former walnut study of Tsar Alexander III in the Anichkov Palace, with an enormous chandelier hanging from the ceiling. It was not by accident that groups of foreign tourists were always coming in here. Somewhat contrasting with the Tsarist atmosphere was a large painting: Lenin playing chess on the island of Capri, with Gorky watching, on a sunny April day in 1908.

Usually one of the trainers – often it was Zak himself – would give explanations to the foreigners and tell them how many children were in the groups, how often they came, and so on. Zak did not particularly like doing this: it diverted him from the lessons, and besides, the questions were always the same. When guests appeared the children would stand up, and without taking their eyes off the board would begin chatting. The smallest would neatly arrange the pieces they had captured from the enemy next to the board. For children capturing a queen or a rook is much more appealing than such a non-material concept as checkmate. When the foreigners had left, Vladimir Grigoryevich or the other trainers would reprimand the most noisy, and the lessons would resume their course until the next visit.

The heavy door of the club opened precisely at four, and all would head for the notice-boards on which hung the tournament tables, find out whom they had to play, set out the pieces, and those playing with clocks would ask Vladimir Grigoryevich or the other trainers: 'Would you set the hands for me, please' – in order to set the correct time, an adjuster was needed, and it was always missing on the chess clocks. The most skilful

could move the clock hands using coins, but this was not always possible. Vladimir Grigoryevich had his own patent, weighted adjuster, which he rarely let out of his sight, and if this did happen, he would reprimand anyone who did not return the instrument to him straight away. The time control was an hour and three quarters for 36 moves, after which the game was adjourned. On an envelope the positions of the pieces on the board were recorded, and the clock times noted. A shield formed by the fingers helped to maintain the secrecy of the sealed move, defending it against the curious glances of the opponent as it was being recorded. After the move had been recorded, the envelope was put in a special folder, awaiting the adjournment session. Sometimes, replying to the question by my mother 'How did your game go?' I would resort to the saving formula 'adjourned', but from my despondent appearance she no doubt guessed the bitter truth.

It was permitted to play blitz only once a week, on Sundays. Occasionally permission was received also on a week-day, with the obligatory promise not to make any noise, a promise which, of course, was constantly broken. The guilty person would be chided, and in the event of a recurrence the clocks could be altogether taken away. If a game was finished, one could ask any trainer who at that moment was free, to look through it; usually this request came from the winner. Once I asked Zak to analyse a game that I had just won. When we arrived at the critical position, I said: 'I stood worse here, of course, but my opponent was very nervous; then I also got myself into time trouble, he began playing for time and he went wrong.' Vladimir Grigoryevich grew visibly darker. 'Did I teach you to play like that? Disgraceful! What sort of a trick is that?' I do not remember all the words he said to me. The children were afraid of Vladimir Grigoryevich, perhaps more than of the other trainers. 'What have you got there?' Vladimir Grigoryevich would ask severely. 'A sheet of paper? And do you know what happens to sheets? Where is your theory notebook? Make sure that this is the last time, and that from now on everything is transferred to your notebook.' His rebuke came back to me quite recently when, after rummaging through everything, I was unable to find an important piece of analysis on the Grünfeld Defence, which had been written on a loose sheet.

But I can also picture him, with a cheerful twinkle in his eye, as he reprimanded a boy: 'Which of us were you speaking to when you said Vladimir Grigoryevich?' Alongside Zak stood the master player Kirillov, who was also called Vladimir Grigoryevich, and the boy did not know whether he was joking or being serious.