



Remembering Viktor Korchnoi

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Almost anything associated with the Cold War appears to be an anachronism these days. New college graduates never saw the hammer and sickle fly over the Kremlin, the deadly wall cut Berlin in half, and defectors leave home in search of that most precious human commodity, liberty.

Even for those of us with a few more years such memories are fading. Still, 1989 remains an extraordinary moment.

The Soviet Union lasted another two years, but it was only a shell of its former totalitarian self. No longer did its citizens have to hope for a trip to the West for an opportunity to leave everything behind.

But that's not the world in which Viktor Korchnoi grew up. He was born in Leningrad in 1931 and survived the 872-day siege during World War II. His father died fighting the Nazi invaders. That experience seems guaranteed to coarsen any life. However, he displayed an aptitude for chess, winning the Soviet junior championship in 1947.

Korchnoi was not just a good chess player. At one point he enjoyed the highest ranking in the world. In 1975 he lost a close match, essentially the semi-finals, to countryman Anatoly Karpov. Since American Bobby Fischer, who broke the Soviet stranglehold over the championship in 1972, refused to defend his title, Karpov was declared champion, making his match with Korchnoi the de facto title fight.

Twice more Korchnoi played Karpov for the title. But in the meantime Korchnoi had defected from the Soviet Union. He never was a compliant Soviet citizen. Stubborn, uncompromising, even rude, he was no Communist model. Eventually Moscow denied him permission to travel abroad and promoted his great rival and former friend, Karpov.

The regime threatened to kill destroy his future. When he finally was allowed to play in Europe in 1976 he failed to take the flight home. He admitted his defection was about career, not politics, but he immediately became a non-person at home and a target of Soviet fury overseas.

He was old, in chess terms, when he fled at age 45. Yet he continued to knock on the championship door.

In 1978 he disposed of the other challengers to gain a shot at Karpov. The winner would be the first to six victories. Korchnoi fell behind 5-2.

Then Korchnoi won three of four games, tying the match. Hope in an improbable victory revived. Then Karpov won the next game, along with the match. Korchnoi again challenged in 1981, but was overwhelmed 6-2.

Although he had escaped, his wife and son languished in the U.S.S.R., denied permission to join him. Indeed, his son was later imprisoned for resisting the draft. Moscow was only too willing to use them as hostages against Korchnoi. (They were finally freed in 1982.)

The first match also had comic-opera aspects with participation of monks and hypnotists, use of mirrored sun glasses, x-rays taken of chairs, protests over blueberry yogurt, and claims of tampering that neared Fischeresque absurdities.

Korchnoi played in matches leading to the championship for another decade, but never again challenged for the title. He was doomed to be known as the best chess player who never won the championship.

In the 1984 competition the 53-year-old Korchnoi suffered a 32-year-age gap and lost early to Gary Kasparov, another malcontent in the Soviet system. Kasparov, of Azerbaijani and Jewish descent, went on to defeat Karpov in three successive matches (with their own bizarre drama). Soon the Soviet Union was tossed on the trash heap of history.

Korchnoi ended up as the oldest active grandmaster playing major tournaments. For years he was by far the oldest grandmaster in the top 100 and still a ferocious competitor.

He continued to win tournaments and in 2006 became the Senior Chess Champion. At age 80 he won the national championship of Switzerland, where he had settled. Even after a stroke in 2012

he continued to play.

Korchnoi truly was a chess legend, playing for more than a half century. Never loved, he was widely respected at the end of his life. His 80th birthday celebration in 2011 was celebrated by Kasparov, now retired and fighting for democracy in Russia. And eulogies were many on his passing.

Thankfully, he finished his life in freedom. His childhood was harsh; his career difficult. But he spent almost half of his life in the West, able to taste liberty even before the Soviet Union fell. Viktor Korchnoi is one more reminder of the manifold injustices of totalitarian communism. RIP Viktor.

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