SKITTLES ROOM

The year 2001 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Max Euwe. ***ChessCafe.com*** *is pleased to present a tribute to Euwe by GM Genna Sosonko. Having left the USSR for Holland in 1972, Sosonko understands the complex relationship that existed between Soviet and Western chess. A regular contributor to* New In Chess, *Sosonko has emerged as one of the most respected journalists writing today. His recent book* Russian Silhouettes *has received acclaim worldwide. We are pleased to present his original essay about the Dutch world champion. We hope you enjoy...*

Remembering Max Euwe

Part 1

by Genna Sosonko

First meeting

In the summer of 1972 I departed the Soviet Union, my luggage consisting entirely of a strong desire to leave the country, a rather sketchy impression of the world that lay beyond its borders, and a suitcase full of books. According to the rules I was allowed to carry out only books printed in the country after 1945; books printed before that date required special permission. Overcoming the obstacles thrown up by the bureaucracy, I obtained the desired stamp from the Ministry of Culture – "Permission given to remove from the USSR" – for a book printed in 1936.

This was a chess book. I had used it more than once to give children lessons in the Leningrad House of Pioneers, where I had worked as a trainer; to this day, I consider it one of the best chess books ever. I still have it. The title page reads: *Max Euwe / A Course of Lectures on Chess*. On the publisher's page is its title in Dutch" *Practische schaaklessen*; no longer do I even pause at the double "a", so unusual in the Russian language, in the second word of the title. I could not have imagined then, that within a few months of my leaving, I would be speaking to the author, meeting frequently with him, and even playing him a short match.

I saw Euwe for the first time in Amsterdam in late autumn of 1972, when he asked me to help him with one of his books on opening theory. At first, I agreed; but then my own chess career pushed aside everything else, and we had to give up on this idea.

"FIDE's Staff Headquarters" was the grandiose name given by the Soviet press to a pair of medium-sized rooms on the Passeerdersgracht in downtown Amsterdam, a few minutes' walk from my home; while walking, I would occasionally look in there. Euwe was constantly abroad, but sometimes I would find him in, and sometimes, he would ask me to translate letters he received from the Soviet Union. These letters were all very similar, and almost always included requests – for autographs, photos, or books. "Do you think this will be enough?" he would usually ask me, as he signed a piece of paper or autographed a photo. "More than enough," I would reply. "Do you really think it's enough?" he would say, doubtfully. In his voice, I could hear the intonations of Alexander the Great, who gave a friend 50 talents, and when the man said that 10 talents would have been enough, replied: "For you, it would have been enough; it's not enough for me."

In the autumn of 1975, we played a short two-game match in the studio of the television company AVRO in Hilversum. A book about it was even published afterwards: *Euwe-Sosonko Match*, in which his best games were displayed next to mine. I don't have to tell what an honor this juxtaposition was for me. The book also spoke of chess in Holland, and its hope – the young Jan Timman. The original plan was for him to be Euwe's opponent in this match, but Jan's father died just a few days before the starting date. *Photo: Match Euwe-Sosonko 1975 Hilversum*

Later, in the detailed research on Euwe's career by the Soviet grandmaster and psychologist Krogius, I read that, "Euwe willingly submitted to the creation of a central isolated pawn, and had great success playing these positions." I myself found this to be true in the first game of our match, where I miraculously saved a draw. Krogius was also correct in saying, "It was most advantageous to prepare some opening novelty – even if, with proper play, it led to no advantage. As a rule, one could count on a strong psychological impact from the unexpected." The course of the second game fully supported this

evaluation, too: the new continuation I employed in the Slav Defense was no stronger than that used as far back as his match with Alekhine, forty years before. But it was obvious that this type of game did not suit him, and I managed to win this game.

At that time, the Secretary of the International Chess Federation, or FIDE, was Ineke Bakker. A few days after the match, she met in Moscow with the USSR Minister of Sports, Sergey Pavlov. "He was

beside himself with rage," she recalled later. "'What – you mean Euwe couldn't find any other opponent for this match? He forgets that he is not just a grandmaster, but the President of the International Chess Federation. This is a provocation, a provocation,' he repeated several times." Of course, it never entered Euwe's head to consider the political subtext of our match, even though a year earlier, not a single Soviet grandmaster had come to Wijk aan Zee in Holland, precisely because of my participation. [*Photo: Euwe, Edmondson, Ineke Bakker*] Today, it seems unbelievable; but in those days, the government considered anyone who left USSR territory a traitor, whose name should disappear forever from the pages of the national press. Of course, this weapon harks back to primeval magic: cursing one's name. This technique was known to the ancient Romans as "damnatio memorie" – a curse on one's memory, when the offending name was scratched from the banners of stone stelae bearing the text of state documents. As described by Orwell, this phenomenon was familiar to the older generation of Soviet citizens, who remembered well how photographs were doctored, and entire pages of history textbooks erased, and the Great Soviet Encyclopedia replaced the biography by geography: instead article of Beria appeared another – of the Bering Strait. To this day, I have a copy of a sports journal, published in Leningrad, showing a three-way tie for the championship of Holland, 1973, between Enklaar and Zuidema.

KGB files

Six months after my match with Euwe, the Soviet functionaries had to deal with this same problem, but on a considerably larger scale: in the summer of 1976, after the IBM tournament in Amsterdam, Viktor Korchnoi sought political asylum in Holland. One cannot call this an impulsive decision. In January of that year, at the tournament in Hastings, Korchnoi and I spent nearly every evening weighing every possible means for him to go to the West.

At the opening of the tournament, he asked me to help him talk to Euwe. The conversation boiled down to the following: Korchnoi had many problems in the Soviet Union, his position there was compromised, soon the Candidates' Matches would begin, in which he would be a participant; what would happen to him if ...

Euwe understood in a flash. "Viktor," he said, "of course you will retain all your rights. We will help you, don't worry," and so forth. I translated emotionlessly, understanding the importance of what was happening. It would be wrong to say that this conversation sealed Korchnoi's decision – he had been a long time making it – but there can be no doubt that Euwe's friendly, encouraging tone lent him certainty.

During the course of the conversation, I glanced occasionally at Euwe. He spoke like a man being asked for aid and counsel by a colleague: everything he said was a natural reaction, that first outpouring of the soul which Talleyrand so cautioned young diplomats against. There was nothing resembling a caculating politician, the President of a diverse, hard-to-manage federation. Otherwise, he might have guessed that the number of his problems associated with this possible decision by his partner in conversation would grow at an unbelievable rate. The Soviet federation, the most influential in FIDE, harbored considerable enmity toward Euwe after the Fischer-Spassky match. Then, it had been Euwe who, by closing his eyes at times to the FIDE constitution, did everything in his power to ensure that the match would take place. Fischer's victory represented a powerful blow to the prestige of the Soviet chess school; and it was doubly painful, inasmuch as the victory was gained by a representative of the United States of America. The Cold War was then raging full force, with Nixon and Kissinger in the White House, and Brezhnev in the Kremlin.

In 1976, Euwe insisted on standing by FIDE's decision to hold the Olympiad in Israel, with whom the Soviet Union at that time did not have diplomatic relations. This inevitably led to the boycotting of the event by the Soviet Union and almost every other country in the socialist camp. So that now, the departure to the West of one of their strongest grandmasters, a Candidate for the World Championship, went beyond the boundaries of sport and became a political act. The position taken by Euwe on the Korchnoi question became the straw that broke the camel's back of the Soviets' patience. Documents from

the KGB's secret archives, rendered accessible only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, show at what level decisions were taken regarding chess, in a country where everything was inextricably linked with politics:

> *Central Committee, Communist Party of the Soviet Union — SECRET*
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> *The Committee on Physical Culture and Sport of the Soviet of Ministries of the USSR, as an addendum to information dated 19th August of this year, concerning the participation of Soviet sportsmen in the chess Olympiad held in Libya in October-November of 1976, and the refusal of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) to alter [the site of] the Chess Olympiad in Israel, considers it necessary to inform you that, in recent years, the situation in FIDE has generally strayed from the norm. M. Euwe, the President of this Federation, has systematically and accordingly ignored numerous suggestions proffered by socialist countries, and undertaken measures which bear witness to his pro-American and pro-Zionist orientation, going even so far as to take decisions which infringe upon the lawful interests of Soviet chessplayers. This was made especially clear during the time of preparation for the World Championship matches between the American grandmaster, Robert Fischer, and the Soviet players Boris Spassky and Anatoly Karpov.*
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> *In 1974-1975, despite the objections of the chess federations of the USSR, several socialist countries, and also a number of Arab states, M. Euwe decided to hold the Chess Olympics in Israel. Today, it is obvious to anyone that this was a mistake (Only 30-35 delegations will be in Israel, whereas previous Olympiad drew more than 70 countries of the 93 belonging to FIDE.); however, Euwe stubbornly insists that he will not change the Olympics from Israel.*
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> *Another indication of M. Euwe's one-sided attitude is his refusal to act objectively in the situation which has arisen in connection with Grandmaster Korchnoi's betrayal of his Homeland. From the very first days Korchnoi spent in the Netherlands, M. Euwe has systematically defended his right of participation in the Candidates' Matches for the World*

Championship in 1977, despite the fact that it has already been pointed out to him, in confidence, that FIDE is forbidden by its Constitution from interfering in the internal affairs of its national federations. M. Euwe's inability to direct the activities of FIDE shows itself in many other matters as well. It is evident that his advanced age is affecting him (he is 75).

Therefore, the Sports Committee of the USSR believes it would make sense for us, together with other socialist countries, to begin secret negotiations, aiming at the selection of a candidate for the post of FIDE President (from Yugoslavia, perhaps), with the aim of going public, around the end of 1976 or the beginning of 1977, with a request that M. Euwe retire from his post. According the FIDE Constitution, the official Presidential election will be in 1978.

S. P. Pavlov, on behalf of the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport on the Soviet of Ministries of the USSR, 20 August 1976

Document 2

Central Committee of the Communist Party the Soviet Union — SECRET

For a long time now, we have supported contact and the exchange of players between the chessplayers of the USSR and Holland: Soviet players, including many leading grandmasters, participate annually in traditional international tournaments in Holland; and Dutch players have been invited to tournaments in the USSR.

However, in recent years, the Dutch Chess Federation has committed acts of an unfriendly nature towards the USSR; in particular, it has supported chessplayers emigrating from the USSR and from other socialist countries.

Thus, Holland has become the new home of the former USSR Master of Sport G. Sosonko, who emigrated first to Israel,

and then took up residence in Holland. Even before obtaining Dutch citizenship, Sosonko was invited to participate in tournaments as its representative; and in 1975, in what was clearly intended as an act of propaganda, he played a two-game match with the ex-World Champion, FIDE President M. Euwe. Tournaments in Holland have systematically featured the participation of A. Kushnir, who emigrated to Israel from the USSR; the former Czech player L. Kavalek, who now lives in the USA; and other such persons.

The Dutch Chess Federation is now giving aid and comfort to V. Korchnoi. The Dutch government has denied Korchnoi the status of a political emigrant (although his temporary Dutch residency is permitted on "moral and humanitarian" grounds); however, the Dutch Chess Federation has nevertheless undertaken to represent his interests in the Candidates' events.

Understanding that all these steps have political repercussions, the USSR Sports Committee finds it necessary to cancel the sending of Soviet chessplayers to Dutch tournaments (except for official Championship events), to cease sending our leading grandmasters to this country, and to reduce our invitations to Dutch players to visit the USSR.

We ask your approval.

On behalf of the Committee of Physical Culture and Sport in the Soviet of Ministries of the USSR

S. P. Pavlov

15 December 1976

Euwe's relations with the Soviet Union went through various changes. Before the Second World War, he was absolutely entranced by the idea of communism – as a society in which everyone shared equally. Incidentally, this was a point of view that was shared at that time by a large segment of the Western intelligentsia; and you may find offshoots of these ideas in correspondence which Euwe sent out of the USSR to Dutch journals when he first visited the country in

1934. Very few at that time succeeded in resisting the optical illusion, the regimented enthusiasm, or kept themselves from being distracted by the Big Show that was the Soviet Union of those days, in its dealings with foreigners.

During the war, in Amsterdam, Euwe took Russian lessons from Karel van het Reve, later to become a famous Dutch writer and scholar of Slavonic studies – that alone speaks volumes. For the opening ceremonies of the Groningen tournament of 1946, Euwe and his daughters performed a Russian song, whose first verse they remember to this day:

> *How vast a land is my homeland!*
> *How numberless its forests, fields and rivers be!*
> *I know no other land*
> *Where humankind breathes so free!*

Even should one disagree with Goethe's pronouncement, that political songwriting is hackwork by definition, did he fully understand what he was singing?

The enchantment of the Soviet Union vanished after his visit to Moscow in 1948, and it was not just his confidential conversations with pre-war friends Flohr and Keres that helped him reach that conclusion. Of course, any Westerner would have had difficulty understanding the sheer depth of slavery then in force. But there were signs enough: furtive meetings, complete with warnings, such as occurred when he met with Réti's widow, then living in Moscow; his constant scrutiny by the security agencies; and the whole atmosphere of persecution which surrounded a foreigner in those days in the Soviet Union.

Euwe told me that while in Moscow, he asked Botvinnik, "Well, where are X and Y?", whom he remembered from his prewar visit to the USSR in 1934. "They proved to be Enemies of the State," was the response. "How about Z?" persisted Euwe. "He too," glowered the Patriarch.

Euwe's attitude toward the USSR changed forever after the events in Budapest in 1956. He was so shaken by it, in fact, that he intended to fly to Moscow, to the Kremlin itself, in order to explain to them that civilized people could never, ever, behave that way.

After Euwe retired from his job and became President of FIDE, he grew closer to chess than ever, closer even than he had been during the part of his life when he had tried to be a chess professional.

Boris Spassky was World Champion in 1969. It was, in fact, he who nominated Euwe for President of FIDE, on behalf of the Soviet federation and of a number of the leading grandmasters . “Of course, during my match with Fischer, Max indulged Fischer somewhat; well, I indulged him, as well. Euwe was inclined toward compromise, especially when the Soviets got all bent out of shape – as happened often. During the negotiations for the Fischer-Karpov match, Max showed a moment of weakness. He should certainly not have disqualified Fischer, and he should have been a little tougher with the Soviets. I think he was getting a bit of revenge on Fischer – not for himself, but for everyone, on account of his behavior. It’s not simple at all for a chessplayer to act as President of such a large Federation: you get a pile of complicated problems. But Euwe, of course, was the man for the job.”

In the political arena, the West had then to deal with the Soviet Union as a superpower. Euwe’s position was the more complex, in that the Soviet Union was at that time not just a chess superpower – it was the most powerful chessplaying country in the world. So when Euwe was being elected President, he could not help but realize that the Soviets would play a decisive role in FIDE, and that he would have to deal with them constantly. They were professional intriguers, grandmasters of manipulation and dealing, whereas he saw the FIDE President’s primary goal as the popularization of the game itself. Often, when speaking of certain aspects of life in the Soviet Union, he would try to make a joke of it; but when he was among friends, Euwe never hid his negative view of communism. A realist and a pragmatist, he always had to be ready for maneuvering and compromise, and sometimes even to close his eyes. At times he could not understand the Soviets;

at times he was either naive, or he simply did not wish to come down to their mentality, infused as it was with the taint of ideology. In 1973, it was evident that the participation of the strongest Western grandmasters – Larsen and Hübner – in the Leningrad Interzonal was secured by the insistence of the Soviets, and that Euwe had not the firmness to oppose them. The Leningrad Interzonal, which

was won by Korchnoi and Karpov, was obviously stronger than the other, in Petropolis; thus Larsen and Hübner were eliminated from the struggle for the World Championship. *Photo: Max Euwe and Willem-Jan Muhring in the tv-studio in Hilversum during the match Spassky-Fischer 1972*

If you agree with the sad maxim that the honorable will always lose to the dishonorable, because they believe that the dishonorable are honorable, while the dishonorable think the reverse, and regard the honorable as if they too were dishonorable – then he was doomed to fail from the start. But whenever matters of principle were discussed, Euwe stood like a rock.

In Moscow, in 1975, Euwe, as President of FIDE, placed the laurel wreath upon a new World Champion. After Robert Fischer refused to defend his title, that champion was now Anatoly Karpov. Even now, more than a quarter-century later, Karpov believes that Euwe simply had no choice but to follow the letter of the law; and that Fischer would never have played him a match, regardless of what concessions he received. In Karpov's eyes, Euwe was a very good FIDE President, although he did commit one very serious error: "There is no doubt that at that time, he acted with the best of intentions, but the consequences of that error are felt even today. Euwe wanted to spread chess everywhere, even to the tiniest of countries, to third-world nations on every continent. This wasn't a bad idea in and of itself, and as World Champion, I supported him in this. But neither he nor I could have foreseen what this would lead to. He took as his motto: A Grandmaster In Every Country. This led not only to the inflation of the grandmaster title, but also to the leadership vacuum at the head of the world of chess – in other words, to our current situation."

Garry Kasparov believes that Euwe as President of FIDE was in some ways an idealist, but mostly a pragmatist – even though, when the moment finally arrived to put a stop to Soviet aggression, he was unable to do so. "I understand that the Soviets at that time were very powerful; but still, today one would like to believe that it would have been possible. If only because one would rather not believe in such a deterministic view of history. It appears to me that, as FIDE President, unfortunately, he could not foresee the dangers flowing from a FIDE practically under Soviet dominance – which finally in fact happened."

Viktor Korchnoi remembers Euwe not only as one of the last

honorable FIDE Presidents, but also as a man who did a lot for him personally, after he settled in the West.

Yuri Averbakh, a man who represented the Soviet Union on more than one occasion, met Euwe frequently at various meetings and FIDE Congresses: “He was never hostile; he always sought to understand the opposing point of view; he was always looking to compromise. Such behavior was in sharp contrast to the behavior of the Soviet delegation leaders, who were ready to press one line and one line only: the one that had been worked out beforehand. Of course, Euwe held staunchly to his opinion that Fischer must play a match for the World Championship, that he had to have that chance, regardless of the cost. For this, Max sometimes broke the rules; on this matter, he even came into conflict with Botvinnik. But Max Euwe was, without a doubt, the best President FIDE ever had!”

The Champion

The culmination of Euwe’s chess career was undoubtedly his 1935 match with Alekhine. Had he not won this match, and thereby become World Champion, Euwe’s name would now be grouped with those of Spielmann, Réti, Vidmar and other notable but not preeminent players of the prewar era.

Before the match, practically everyone believed there could be only one outcome: Alekhine had to win. That was the general opinion in the Soviet Union also, where Euwe participated, a year before the match, in a tournament of Soviet masters, and finished in the middle of the score table. This was Euwe’s first trip to the Soviet Union; in all, he was to visit the country over two dozen times.

Viktor Baturinsky, who would later rise to become one of the most influential chess functionaries in the Soviet Union, was a Young Komsomol member then, and a sports instructor. In that capacity, he was in Moscow, at the reception given in the Hotel Metropole in Euwe’s honor.

Baturinsky recalls: “At the very end of the dinner, the head of Soviet chess, Krylenko, asked Euwe what his chances were in the match with Alekhine. To which Euwe replied, ‘Honestly speaking, not very good. Alekhine is an extremely strong player, and beating him is very difficult, of course.’ ‘Why, then, what is the point of your challenging him?’ continued Krylenko. ‘First of all, it’s a very high honor for me

to play a match for the World Championship; and second, my little country would like to have a national hero,' was Euwe's reply."

Thus, Euwe approached his match with Alekhine in a mood best expressed by these lines from a poem by Rilke: "Wer spricht von Siegen? Ueberstehn ist alles." ("Who talks of victory? Survival is all that matters.")

Alexander Alekhine spent the last twenty-five years of his life as an émigré, mostly in France. But by education, manners and lifestyle, he remained a Russian. Even though he wrote and spoke English, German and French, his thoughts found their most accurate, forthright expression in those books and articles he wrote in his native tongue. He wrote for his countrymen outside Russia's borders; and these articles, from magazines and newspapers published chiefly in Paris in the '20s and '30s, which have now become bibliographical rarities, are completely unknown to the vast majority of readers. In these articles, he expressed himself with a great deal more frankness than in the German, French or English publications – here, he was "among his own."

Thus, two years before the match with Euwe, Alekhine, writing for the magazine "Nasha Smena" (The Future Generation) about the younger players – Euwe, Flohr, Kashdan, Pirc, and Stoltz – wrote that, "Alas, one characteristic they share is a lack of originality. One can find nothing whatsoever that is new in their games. All that they have managed to do, to a greater or lesser extent, is to absorb absolutely anything of value from the ideas and writings of the top representatives of the two generations preceding them, and to convert this knowledge into a fearsome practical weapon." Here he also gives a rather reserved evaluation of Euwe's chess writings, which he finds "useful in themselves, but which are in most cases only well-intentioned, detailed collections of the latest achievements of opening theory: you will find no constructive thoughts therein."

Some months before the start of the match, Alekhine gave the following evaluation of his soon-to-be opponent and his chances in the match for the Russian émigré newspaper "Poslednye Novosti" (Recent News), of Paris: "I first heard of Euwe after I left Soviet Russia in 1921 ... His play, his youthful successes undoubtedly promised "something"; but that "something" still fell short.... After a relatively unsuccessful period in the early '20s, the psychology of

Euwe the practical player underwent its first, and perhaps most fundamental change. If he did not consciously surmise it, then instinctively he felt that the kernel of his gift lay *not within, but outside himself*. In other words, in contrast to Lasker, Capablanca, Nimzovich and others of that class, he would never learn from himself, but rather from others' thoughts, others' experiences, the fruits of others' talents … He managed to embody his best feature – a strictly planned approach to the organization of a chess game; and this helped him a great deal. ... At the end of 1925, during my visit to Holland, he offered to play me a ten-game series (there was no talk of a 'match' then) the following year – and, by fortunate circumstance, this event became one more turning point in his career. This was because, first of all, it was in that year that the possibility of a match between Capablanca and me finally became concrete. This in turn meant that Euwe was no longer facing off against an ordinary master, even a first-class master; now it was a *Weltmeisterschafts* – a Candidate; and the chess press, especially the Dutch, gave this event the requisite publicity. Second – and most importantly, of course – the result of those ten games was far from convincing, either sporting-wise or as a matter of quality: I won three and lost two games, with five draws. There were numerous reasons for my lack of success; but chief among them was indubitably my thoughtless, unjustified underestimation of my opponent. This was the moment that gave rise to Euwe's 'royal ambitions', as well as those of his supporters ..."

"What are the chances in our match, assuming maximal technical preparation on the part of my opponent? The first (rather substantial) point to be examined is: Will I be on the same maximal level of technical preparation as my adversary? In other words, will I have worked out to the same extent a program of openings, more or less unexpected by him, prepared especially for this match, and the sequence I shall employ them in, depending on my adversary's style and knowledge? To this question, I must definitely give a negative answer. It is not that I deny possession of some expertise regarding openings, and knowledge of 'variations'; it's just that I cannot, on the basis of my own experience, consider them to be the *deciding* factor in a protracted, important contest. (...) The second point, and in my opinion the more important one, is the psychological question. In the course of such a protracted contest, two factors which will leave an imprint on the spirit of both players: (1) the surrounding milieu (the reaction of the masses and the so-called 'experts', and the attitude of the local and international press, etc.); and (2) the influence of the

adversary's personality.

"In the realm of general psychology, Euwe's advantages are evident: (1) any candidate possessing decent chances at the title owns the sporting sympathies of a significant part of 'society', as well as the absolute sympathy of the press, which by its very nature always seeks change in the status quo, something new; (2) Euwe is the hero of a little country which has never (unless I'm mistaken) had a champion, much less a world champion.

"These two presumptions are enough to make Euwe the 'hero' of our match in the eyes of the press, whether he wins or loses.

"Now, a few words about the second psychological factor – the influence of the adversary's personality. Here I think I have a definite advantage. *I do not believe Euwe to be a future World Champion.* I don't think that, even should he happen to win from me, he would be acknowledged as, in fact, the best player in the world.

"If our contest should end in victory for him, it would only show that at the given moment I was not on top of my game; so much the worse for me. Whereas Euwe, should he become, formally, World Champion, will have a difficult task ahead – similar to the one facing me after I won the match with Capablanca: to show that, for this space of history, he Euwe – is really the best.

"While hardly (*et pour cause*) wishing him to win this match, I do hope that he would in fact show himself to be a true World Champion."

Euwe's victory was a total surprise to the chess world. A giant had been crushed – one who had, over the preceding decades, not just made them used to his repeated victories, but to resounding, convincing victories, earned in such manner as to leave no doubt that at this moment, he was the strongest player in the world. Euwe concluded his victory speech by saying, "I fear I will not be World Champion long." I think these words bear witness more to his objectivity than to humility. Euwe doubtless understood what caliber of player he had vanquished; in addition, there was Capablanca – very much still a presence – and the new stars Botvinnik and Keres, just coming onto the world stage.

If the West recovered fairly quickly from the shock of Alekhine's

defeat, and the chess world took up a position of watchful waiting, then the Soviet Union experienced a 180-degree turnabout – a characteristic response, I might add, for the government's politics in general: only the realities were to be considered, only those most stubborn things – facts; only strength was to be believed in. The country's history was subject to constant revision: heroes became traitors and sellouts; more rarely, the reverse could happen. Alekhine, whom the Soviet press had described as a monarchist and White-Guardist, was now also dethroned as a chessplayer, after losing the match to Euwe; while by contrast, the new World Champion was elevated to hitherto undreamed-of heights.

Yakov Rokhlin, a well-known Soviet chess functionary, wrote after the end of the match: "Euwe underscores that not infrequently the representatives of the so-called combinative tendency take a superficial attitude to matters involving the combination of attacking and defensive ideas. The crossing of the 'demarcation line' needs to be thoroughly prepared. This has been made necessary, not just by the state of technique in the art of chess in our day, but also by the

historical path taken by the development of chess ... Let a few years elapse, and World Champion Euwe will give what is required and expected of him to the history of chess, namely: a couple of top prizes at international tournaments. Then the whole dramatic episode of his struggle with Alekhine will seem dubious no longer. Chessplayers over the world, however, will long argue over who was the greater genius of the beginning of the century – the titanic Lasker, the intuitive Capablanca, the inspired Alekhine or the methodical Euwe."

Photo: Congratulations from the Dutch Minister of Culture and Education, Slotemaker de Bruine, after Euwe's victory in 1935.

Strong words, no doubt. Euwe was no chess genius; but he was a genius of organization, of logic and order. The football coach's motto: "Order beats class," explains many of Euwe's successes – first and foremost, his victory in the World Championship match. But all these qualities are not enough to make a man World Champion.

Evaluating his own chances of winning the World Championship, Polugaevsky, in his day, wrote that the thing he lacked – and that Fischer, Karpov and Kasparov possessed – was this pugnacity, this

"killer instinct" over the board. "On the other hand," he suggested, "neither Euwe, nor Smyslov, nor Petrosian had such crushing energy, either." This I find hard to agree with. All the World Champions Polugaevsky cites did have such energy, such aggression, during the period of their greatest achievements. Max Euwe too, beneath his absolute correctness, his upbringing, his manners, and his command of many languages – all the things we take as part of Western civilization – also displayed this instinctive, aggressive machismo, the destructive psyche of the born fighter and battler. Without this thirst for victory, this inner certainty of superiority and the desire to demonstrate it, without such ambitions, it is impossible to win a match for the Championship of the World.

In the mid-Fifties, long past the prime of his career, Euwe once found himself analyzing with three leading Dutch players, and began arguing a point with Donner. Donner began to defend himself, saying, "But you also make mistakes sometimes." To which Euwe replied, "Ja, Hein, I do – but you should never forget that I understand chess better than the three of you put together." Unusual words from Euwe; but this or a similar thought, even left unsaid, unexpressed in words, this feeling was deeply ingrained in him. He retained these ambitions, this feeling – to show his superiority, to win! – well into his twilight years. This was evident even to young players who met him over the board, even in the last decade of his life. I felt it, too, during the games of our match.

Two years after Euwe lost the 1937 match, the Soviet Union once again experienced a sharp reversal of its attitude to Max Euwe, by now already ex-World Champion. Every chess publication now quoted Alekhine's words: "I loaned Euwe the Champion's title for two years."

Alekhine's loss of the 1935 match was now being explained by excessive indulgence in alcohol. Alekhine had previously been known to drink: sometimes before a game, sometimes during – as happened, for instance, during the Zurich 1934 tournament. Euwe himself believed that "during the 1935 match, Alekhine was probably drinking before the 18th game, which was drawn; certainly before the 21st, which Alekhine lost; and before the 30th, which was drawn ... There may also have been other times, which I didn't notice," he wrote, "but it's also quite possible that the number of cases was less, since Alekhine, despite his nearsightedness, steadfastly refused to

wear glasses, so he would make his moves with an unsteady hand. This led to the impression that he was drunk, when in reality, he was as sober as a judge."

Salo Flohr, himself a candidate for the World Championship at the time, aided Euwe during the match, even though not as an official second. He recalled later that "Alekhine explained after the match that he was looking for something to stimulate himself, especially before Game 15, when Euwe, after a very bad start, losing 1:3, suddenly tied the score at 7:7! Alekhine said that he was going to 'maneuver'; he had a glass to buck himself up, and won. With that victory under his belt, he decided to press harder: he drank more, but this time, he lost. So he was unable, by the end of the match, to decide just what his organism needed, exactly – did it need drink, or not? Alekhine was absolutely sure that Euwe was not a dangerous opponent for him. At the start of the match, Alekhine was certain of victory. He said to me, sarcastically, "Whom have you come to help? It's just bandages for the dead."

Deserved or Not Deserved?

One future World Champion, Vassily Smyslov, was 14 when the first Alekhine-Euwe match took place. In his own life, this was a period of active study and much independent work; thus he knows the games of the match very well, and remembers them to this day. "There are no accidents in life," Smyslov offers. "Whatever form Alekhine happened to be in at that time, only a master of the highest class could have won a match from him. In that match, Euwe played better – he won, which means he was destined to become World Champion. I think that there is no one in Holland who can match his chess successes – even for as chess-obsessed a country as they are."

And for another World Champion, Boris Spassky, Euwe's victory over Alekhine was not dubious at all: "He played better in that match – that's completely obvious. The fact that, even as a non-professional, he was able to defeat Alekhine at that time, should be seen as a sporting and as a creative deed of heroism. The quality of the games was pretty high, too. Beating Alekhine puts him into the constellation of chess 'apostles'."

Mikhail Botvinnik wrote an interesting characterization of the style of Max Euwe, during the period when this first Soviet World Champion was only a candidate for that title. These notes from Botvinnik's

archives have only recently come to light: “An exceptionally determined, active type of player. Even when he defends, he always tries for active counterplay. He likes to play on the wings. He likes positions that are free of weaknesses, a bit freer; he likes to make troublesome long moves. He aims for development. With an advantage in position, he does not avoid exchanges, and settles for the better endgame. He takes excellent advantage of others’ errors. With a material advantage (a pawn, or the Exchange), he plays with redoubled strength. A subtle, outstanding technician, though not without his tricks.”

Anatoly Karpov himself analyzed the games from the match won by Euwe, and very diligently: “Of course, Alekhine was not in his best form; but Euwe played very well. Remember also that at that time, there were no worthy candidates, because Bogoljubow, who played both previous matches, ingloriously lost both of them.”

Jan Timman compares the match Euwe won from Alekhine with the Karpov-Short match of 1993: “Before that began, Karpov was also considered the favorite; but Short won, and deservedly so. He was a rising star then, he was a lot more motivated, and wanted very much to win – just as Euwe did in ’35. At that moment, Euwe was just playing better.”

Garry Kasparov believes that Euwe formed a link between Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine, in one group, and the new players Botvinnik, Keres, Fine and Reshevsky, making a sort of bridge between them; he brought a new element – research – into chess: “The World Champion must move chess forward, and Euwe did so. Of course, it was not the sort of step that Alekhine made in his time, or let us say Botvinnik; but it was a step forward. All those theoretical duels, especially in the Slav Defense, showed that although Alekhine may have outstripped Euwe as a chessplayer in his general cultural level and in his ability to calculate variations, yet Euwe was the superior analyst, as the outcome of the match clearly demonstrated.

“As for Euwe, the World Champion, there has always been a sort of deeply-held skepticism about this; but my analysis of his first match with Alekhine shows that Euwe deserved it – one does not win the title of World Champion that easily!

“In the second match, in 1937, Euwe labored under a sort of

premonition of doom; yet from the quality of play shown by Alekhine, it is clear that Euwe could have stood toe-to-toe with him, if he had been properly prepared for the match. It seems to me that, had Euwe taken better care of his title, the outcome of the 1937 revenge match might well have been different. I also think that Euwe allowed himself to share in the opinion being bandied about by many people at that time, that his had been an accidental victory; and this had a negative effect on his mindset. Of course, he would have had no chance against Botvinnik, or Keres, of the new generation; but it seems to me that he could have given Alekhine quite a struggle. For he was a very good calculator, as well as a sharp, interesting player. This is shown also by his later games – such as those against Geller and Najdorf at the 1953 Candidates' Tournament. Against Najdorf, he played an intuitive attack, of the type later associated with Tal – very pretty. I think his contribution to the development of chess has been woefully under-appreciated.

"Without doubt, he was one of the least controversial figures in the history of the World Championship. I cannot say anything about Steinitz; but as regards the rest, I can see only three who were wholly without blemish – three Champions who stand alone: Lasker, Euwe and Tal."

I believe the chief reason for Euwe's loss of the second match was his attitude: Well, I've got the World Champion's title. I've fulfilled the hopes of those who believed in me, and helped me. That barrier is overcome; now, life goes on. It was this attitude that foreordained his loss, and not the holes in his preparation, or that Alekhine's uncertain play in the tournaments that followed 1935 lulled Euwe into a false sense of security, as Euwe explained his loss later on. The idea of spending forever demonstrating his chess superiority, and pushing all other aspects of life into the background, was completely uninviting to Euwe. He had none of the qualities – or perhaps the shortcomings – necessary for a lengthy reign as World Champion.

Among the geniuses and philosophers, fanatics and supermen, who can be easily distinguished among the World Champions, Max Euwe stands out for his humility, his ordinariness; he leaves one with the impression that what he did could have been done by almost anyone.

I think that, regarding chess, one might say of Euwe what was said of Flaubert in his time: that his mastery was not of the obvious sort; one

might think that anyone could write like him, but for some reason, nobody does.

I believe that one could divide all the World Champions of this century, beginning with Alekhine, into three categories. Into the first category I would place Alekhine and Fischer. For all the differences between these two geniuses of chess (the one graduated from one of the most prestigious educational institutions in Petersburg, and then defended his dissertation at the Sorbonne, while the other never finished school), they do have a lot in common. For both Alekhine and Fischer, chess, and their superiority in it, defined the very core of existence. Self-expression through chess, and the obligatory victory in it, became for them the point of their whole lives. The things outside of chess that made up their lives were for them secondary in nature, and felt contradictory and variable to them. Life itself seemed to be something in the background.

The second group includes all the World Champions of the second half of the century who were born and grew up in the Soviet Union. The reason is not that at various periods of their lives, they played under the hammer & sickle flag, and obtained stipends from the USSR Sport Committee. The point is that, for certain periods – for some of them, their whole lives – they were under the rules of play, concepts, and norms that were in force in the Soviet Union. And this unites them all, regardless of whether they were genuine Soviet types, such as Botvinnik; or religious, like Smyslov; whether they attempted to live life in an airless space, like Tal; or conformed, like Petrosian, attempting to extract all the benefit he could for himself and the people of his small circle; whether they were pragmatists first and last, elevated to be a symbol of the system, like Karpov; or later became outspoken critics of it, like Spassky or Kasparov.

The third category of World Champions consists of just one man - Max Euwe. He was the only true representative of the West, with all its values, principles and moral categories, formed in his youth, and still the same in his eighth decade.

[END PART I]

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