VASILY SMYSLOV (1921-2010) by Bill Wall

Vasily (Vassily) Vasiliyevich Smyslov was born in Moscow on March 24, 1921 (March 24, 1946 was the day Alekhine died (1892-1946); Yasser Seirawan was born on March 24, 1960).

In 1927, at the age of 6, he learned the game of chess from his father, Vasily Osipovich (V.O.) Smyslov (1881-1943), who had once defeated Alexander Alekhine at St. Petersburg in 1912. His father was an engineering technician employed at the Moscow Motor Works. He had represented the St. Petersburg Technical Institute in intercollegiate chess competitions. He also studied chess under Mikhail Chigorin.

By age 7, Vasily was reading chess books from his father's library.

His first chess book was Jean Dufresne's self-tutor (*Examples of Master Play*), published with an appendix of Emanuel Lasker's lectures *Common Sense in Chess.*

On May 29, 1928, Smyslov won a copy of *Alekhine's My Best Games, 1908-1923,* which was his very first prize for winning a chess event, a match between him and his uncle (his uncle gave him rook odds). It was awarded to him by his uncle, Kirill Osipovich Smyslov, a second category player. The book was inscribed, "To the winner of the match, to the future world champion Vasya Smyslov."

In 1934, Jose Capablanca (1888-1942) and Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941) visited Moscow, which inspired Smyslov to study chess harder. He studied the chess books in his father's library (over 100 chess books).

In 1935, at the age of 14, Smyslov began participating in classification chess tournaments in Moscow. His first tournament was a summer event at the Gorky Park (Central Park of Culture and Rest) chess club. He soon became a 3rd category player.

In the fall of 1935, he became a member at the Moskvoretsky House of Pioneers and started composing chess problems. One of his endgame compositions was published in *64*.

Smyslov observed the Moscow tournament of 1935 (Flohr, Botvinnik, Lasker, Capablanca, etc) and 1936 (Capablanca, Botvinnik, Flohr, Lilienthal, Ragozin, Lasker, etc), watching the play of Lasker and Capablanca.

In early 1936, he became a 2nd category player. By the end of the year, he was a 1st category player (Candidate Master).

In January 1938, at the age of 16, Smyslov won the 3rd All-Union boys' championship in Russia

(USSR Junior Championship), held in Leningrad, with a score of 8 points out of 10 (8/10). His first place prize was a chess clock.
In the summer of 1938, he tied for 1st-3rd place at a 1st Category tournament in Gorky, with a score of 10/13.

In late 1938, he tied for first place in the 18th Moscow city championship with Russian master Sergey Belavenets (1910-1942), scoring 12.5/17. Smyslov gained the title of Master of Sport of the USSR.

In 1939, he took 12th-13th place (8/17) in the Leningrad-Moscow tournament, won by Salo Flohr (1908-1983).

In 1939-40, he took 2nd-3rd (9/13) in the 19th Moscow Championship, won by Andre Lilienthal (1911-2010).

In 1940, he was excused from military service due to poor eyesight, and entered the Moscow Institute of Aviation (State University of Aerospace Technology).

In 1940, he played in the 12th USSR championship, held in Moscow, and took 3rd place with 8 wins, 10 draws, and 1 loss (13/19), behind Igor Bondarevsky (1913-1979) and Lilienthal, and ahead of Paul Keres (1916-1975) and Mikhail Botvinnik (1911-1995).

In 1941. at the age of 20, he played in the Leningrad-Moscow match tournament (1941 Absolute Championship), also taking 3rd place, behind Botvinnik and Keres, with 4 wins, 12 draws, and 4 losses (10/20). At age 20, he was already Grandmaster strength. He was awarded the title grandmaster of the USSR, the youngest grandmaster in the world at the time. The other Soviet grandmasters were Botvinnik, Keres, Boleslavsky, Flohr, Kotov, Bondarevsky, and Lilienthal.
In 1942, he took 2nd at Kubishev, Russia with an 8 out of 11 score. The event was won by Isaac Boleslavsky (1919-1977).

In 1942 Smyslov won the Moscow championship with 10 wins, 1 loss, and 4 draws(12/15).
He defended his title and won the Moscow Championship in 1943-44 (Botvinnik took 1st place in 1943-44, but was not a resident of Moscow, so the title went to Smyslov, who took 2nd place). He scored 11.5 out of 16.

In 1944 Smyslov took second place, behind Botvinnik, in the 13th USSR championship, held in Moscow. He scored 10.5/16. The 13th USSR championship was scheduled for 1941 and preliminaries had actually started, but Hitler attacked Russia in June, ending the event.

In 1944-45 Smyslov won the Moscow championship for the third time in a row with a score of 13 out of 16. The event was played at Moscow's Central Red Army House. Smyslov was now considered the 3rd best player in the USSR, behind Botvinnik and Keres.

In 1945, Smyslov only scored 8.5 out of 17 (6 wins, 5 draws, 6 losses) in the 14th USSR championship, held in Moscow from June 1 to July 2 and won by Botvinnik (15/17), followed by Boleslavsky and David Bronstein (1924-2006). Smyslov placed 10th-11th.
In 1945, Smyslov had the worst result of his career at Tallinn, only scoring 6.5 out of 15 in a weak field of players.

On September 1-4, 1945, Smyslov twice defeated 4-time U.S. champion Sammy Reshevsky (1911-1992) in the USSR vs. USA 10-board radio match. In game 1, Reshevsky took 1 hour and 38 minutes to play the first 23 moves. Smyslov only used 8 minutes (he fist 15 moves in 1 minute) and all the moves were "book" as the first 24 moves appeared in the May issue of *Chess in the USSR*, which Smyslov was familiar with and Reshevsky was not. After losing the second game, Reshevsky remarked, "If my opponent were sitting opposite me, he wouldn't be playing such good chess." They played second board for their team. The Soviets won 15.5 to 4.5.
In 1945-46, he scored 7.5 out of 15 in the Moscow Championship, for a tie of 7yh-11th places. David Bronstein won the event.
In 1946 he took 3rd-6th at the 25th Moscow championship with a 8.5/15 score. The event was won by David Bronstein.

In August 1946, Smyslov took third place, behind Botvinnik and Max Euwe (1901-1981), with a score of 7 wins, 11 draws, and 1 loss (Botvinnik) at Groningen, Netherlands (Howard Staunton Memorial, the first major chess tournament after World War II). Botvinnik, Smyslov, and Keres were investigated by the "organs of state security" and Botvinnik and Smyslov were allowed to travel outside the USSR when no compromising material was found on them. However, Keres, by reason of his collaboration with the Germans, was not allowed to leave the USSR and play at Groningen.
In 1946, Smyslov, along with Botvinnik and Keres, were exempted from playing in the USSR Championship Semi-Finals, which were held in Moscow, Leningrad, and Tiflis. In 1947, he played in the 15th USSR Championship, held in Leningrad, and tied for 3rd-4th place with Isaac Bondarevsky. First place went to Paul Keres, followed by Boleslavsky.

The world chess federation, FIDE, sponsored a world championship match tournament at The Hague and Moscow in 1948 to determine the next world champion. Smyslov took second place (11/20), behind Botvinnik but ahead of Keres, Reshevsky, and Euwe. In 1991, Botvinnik was interviewed and said that there was an official order from Stalin that Smyslov and Keres were ordered to lose to Botvinnik to make it easier for Botvinnik to win the world title. Some sources (Averbakh) say that the USSR leadership wanted Smyslov to be the world champion because he was clearly Russian, while Botvinnik was Jewish. However, Botvinnik was a Communist and Smyslov was not.
On March 23, 1957, it was Smyslov's 27th birthday and he was scheduled to play Euwe at 5:30 pm. The tournament committee planned to give him a bouquet of tulips before play began. But by 5:30 the flowers had not arrived yet. Euwe and Smyslov decided to wait until the flowers arrive, so they took their places at the table but did not ply. Some of the spectators got upset that the players were chatting to each other and not playing chess. After 10 minutes the tulips

were still not delivered, so they decided to play their game. After five more minutes, the flowers finally arrived and play came to a halt until the ceremonies were concluded.
On July 9, 1949 at the age of 27, Smyslov married Nadezhda Andreevna Selimanov. He adopted her son, Vladimir (1939-1957). Smyslov taught Vladimir how to play chess, who became a strong amateur.

On November 20, 1949 Smyslov tied for first place with David Bronstein in the 17th USSR championship, held in Moscow, with 9 wins, 8 draws, and 2 losses (13/19). There was no playoff to determine first place.

In 1949, FIDE recognized the term grandmaster for the first time. The title was given to 17 players. Smyslov was one of those players.

Smyslov's other interest was music and in 1950 he auditioned as a baritone singer at the Bolshoi Theater. However, he failed the audition (he got as far as the last 50 to be auditioned) and decided to become a full-time chess professional. He was a singer and played the piano.

At the 1950 Budapest Candidates tournament, Smyslov took 3rd place, behind Bronstein and Boleslavsky, with 5 wins, 10 draws, and 3 losses (10/18).

In 1950, FIDE awarded 27 players the first Grandmaster title. Smyslov was one of those 27 players for the first GM title.

In 1952, Smyslov wrote *IzbrannyyepPartii*, which contained 60 of his best games up to 1951. It was published in Moscow.

On the eve of the 1953 Candidates tournament, he received a telephone call from the USSR Sports Committee and was ordered to have Vladimir Simagin (1919-1968) replaced Vladimir Alatortsev (1909-1987), Smyslov's second since 1946.

On October 24, 1953, in Neuhausen-Zurich 1953, Smyslov won the second Candidates tournament with 9 wins 10 draws and 1 loss (to countryman Alexander Kotov - the Soviet authorities and Smyslov fans were not happy about that), two points ahead of the rest of the field, which included Bronstein, Reshevsky, Keres, Petrosian, Najdorf, Geller, etc. Chessmetrics gives this event his best individual performance, with a performance rating of 2824. Grandmaster Boris Gulko claims that David Bronstein was ordered to draw his game against Smyslov when Bronstein had winning chances. If Bronstein had won, it was likely that Bronstein instead of Smyslov would have played against Botvinnik for the world championship. However, if Bronstein had won, it was also possible that Sammy Reshevsky, who was right behind Smyslov, would win the tournament, and the USSR authorities did not want to see Reshevsky, and American Jew, playing Botvinnik for the world championship. The problem with this Gulko's

statement was that Bronstein did not have winning chances in the 20 move Ruy Lopez, Exchange Variation draw in their game from round 26. A loss would have given Smyslov 17.5 points and he still would have won the tournament. Bronstein would have had 16.5 points and taken 2nd. Reshevsky and Keres had 16 points.
David Bronstein relates that a KGB agent named Moshintsev approached Bronstein and gave him instructions: "Before the game with Smyslov you will go to his room and agree how to make a quick draw. All understood?" Bronstein went to Smyslov's room two hours before their game in Round 26. Smyslov claims it was Bronstein who wanted a draw, but there was no coordinated Soviet effort to stop Reshevsky.
During the tournament, he found time to sing operatic extracts on Swiss radio.
On March 16, 1954, Smyslov began play with Mikhail Botvinnik for the world championship title in Moscow. He drew the match on May 13, with 7 wins, 10 draws, and 7 losses (12 points out of 24 games), but Botvinnik retained the title.
In 1955, Smyslov tied for 1st-2nd (12/19) with Efim Geller (1925-1998) in the 22nd USSR championship. Geller later won the playoff match to determine 1st place.

In June 1954, Smyslov played board 1 in the USSR vs USA match in New York. Smyslov played Reshevsky four games, and all four games were drawn. The USSR team won 20-12.

Smyslov won at Zagreb 1955 with 10 wins and 9 draws (14.5/19).

He then won the Amsterdam Candidates tournament in 1956 with 6 wins, 11 draws, and 1 loss (11.5/18).

At the first Alekhine Memorial in Moscow, 1956, Smyslov tied with Botvinnik for first place with 7 wins and 8 draws (11/15).

On April 30, 1956, Smyslov won the Candidates tournament held in Leewarden, Netherlands near Amsterdam. He scored 11.5 out of 18, ahead of Keres, Szabo, Spassky, Petrosian, Bronstein, and Geller.

Smyslov again became the challenger to Botvinnik in the world championship match beginning on March 5, 1957, in Moscow at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall. This time, Smyslov defeated Botvinnik with 6 wins, 13 draws, and 3 losses (12.5/22) to become the world chess champion. Smyslov chose Isaac Boleslavsky as his second, and was assisted by VladimirMakogonov and Vladimir Simagin. Boleslavsky was David Bronstein second in 1951 when Bronstein played Botvinnik for the world championship title. Smyslov became the 7th official world chess champion on April 27, 1957. For his victory, Smyslov was awarded the Order of Lenin, the highest sate award in the Soviet Union. Botvinnik was also awarded the Order of Lenin. The only other two chess players that have been awarded the Order of Lenin is former world

women's chess champion Nona Gaprindashvili and former world chess champion Anatoly Karpov.
Botvinnik said that Smyslov knew Botvinnik's preparation moves, implying that Botvinnk's second, Ilya Kan (1909-1978), leaked the moves to Smyslov. Botvinnik used no second his his return match.
In 1957, Smyslov co-wrote *Rook Endings* with Grigory Levenfish (1889-1961).
While Vasily Smyslov was playing for the World Chess Championship, his adopted son, Vladimir, was playing for the World Junior Championship.
In 1957, Smyslov's adopted son, Vladimir Selimanov, age 18, participated in the 3rd World Junior Championship, held in Toronto. He was the Soviet entrant to the event and one of the favorites to win. However, he took 4th place (won by Bill Lombardy of New York with a perfect 11-0 score, followed by Mathias Gerusel and Alexander Jongsma) with a score of 7 wins, 2 losses (to Lombardy and Gerusel), and 2 draws (8/11).
During the tournament, Vladimir fell in love with a Canadian girl. Upon is return to Moscow, he asked permission to the Soviet authorities to return to Canada and marry. When permission to return to Canada was refused by the Soviet authorities, a despondent Selimanov killed himself in 1960

A return match for the world championship was held a year later in Moscow beginning on March 3, 1958. During the match, Smyslov came down with pneumonia, but played his games anyway. Smyslov lost his title after winning 5 games, drawing 11 games, and losing 7 games. He had been world champion for one year and 12 days (April 27, 1957 to May 9, 1958). Only Mikhail Tal had a shorter reign as world champion (one year and five days).
In 1958, he wrote *My Best Games of Chess (1935-57*). It was reprinted in paperback by Dover in 1972.
From January 1952 through September 1958, Smyslov was ranked #1 in the wolrd for 59 months.

Smyslov was a Candidate in 1959, but Mikhail Tal (1936-1992) prevailed and won the right to meet Botvinnik a year later. At the 1959 Candidates tournament in Bled/Zagreb/Belgrade, Smsylov finished in 4th place (15/28), 5 points behind Tal. At the time, Smyslov was married and his wife was in Moscow, but he started a public relationship with a Yugoslav woman chess master that may have affected his play.

Smyslov won Moscow 1960, won Moscow 1963, won the Capablanca
Memorial in Havana 1965 (ahead of Fischer), won Hastings 1968-9,
won Monte Carlo 1969, 3rd at Moscow 1971, 2nd at Teesside 1975,
2nd at Buenos Aires 1978, and 2nd at Moscow 1981.
In 1963, Smyslov was interviewed and asked if a computer would be world champion by 2000. Smyslov compared chess with music, asserting that just as a mechanical composer could not rival human fantasy, so a machine could not play better chess than a man.

In 1964, Smyslov was admitted to the Interzonal without having to qualify in the USSR Zonal on the direct instructions of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Korchnoi claimed that

Smyslov used "his friends"
in the Central Committee, possibly culture minister Pyotr Demichev, to get himself one of the USSR four seeds into the Interzonal without having to play in the Soviet Zonal (a special non-Soviet championship). The other seven zonal players were outraged and considered conducting a strike and not playing. But Boris Spassky would not take part in a strike and the plot collapsed.

In June 1964, Smylsov tied for 1st place with Larsen, Spassky, and Tal at the Interzonal tournament in Amsterdam (17/23 score). First place was $250.
In 1965, Smyslov began taking boxing lessons as part of his training for his Candidates match with Efim Geller. However, it may not have helped as he lost his match.

In April 1965, Smyslov lost to Efim Geller in the quarter-finals
of the Candidates matches played in Moscow, losing 3 and drawing 5 games. Boris Spassky eventually won the Candidates matches that year. Smyslov would not qualify for another Candidates match for another 18 years.

In 1970, he played board 6 for the USSR team in the USSR vs the World match.
He played Reshevsky in the first 3 games, with one win, one loss and one draw.
For the 4th game, he played Fridrik Olafsson (1935-). This game decided the outcome of the match, which the USSR team won when Smyslov won.

In July 1971, Smyslov's peak Elo rating was 2620.

In 1975, Smyslov first played Kasparov when Smyslov gave a simul in Baku. Smyslov beat Kasparov in 30 moves as Black. When they next met in 1981 (national team tournament), Kasparov won both games against Smyslov.

In March 1976, Smyslov played at Lone Pine, California, won by Tigran Petrosian (1929-1984). Smyslov and Petrosian were the first Soviets to play at Lone Pine. Smyslov tied for 2nd place (5/7).

In 1979, he wrote his autobiography, *V poiskakh harmonii* (In Search of Harmony).

In 1982 at the age of 61, Smyslov took second place (behind Ribli)
at the Las Palmas Interzonal with 6 wins, 5 draws, and 2 losses (8.5/13). He thus became the oldest player to qualify as a Candidate.

Smyslov drew his quarter-final match with Robert Huebner
with 1 win, 12 draws, and 1 loss at Velden, Austria. The tie-breaker was
a spin at the roulette wheel (which Huebner objected to) in the casino where the match was held and Smyslov came up the winner. Smyslov's color was red and Huebner's color was black. When the roulette wheel was spun the first time, it came up 0 and on green (another tie). On the second spin, the ball landed on red 3.

In the semi-finals, Smyslov defeated Zoltan Ribli of Hungary with 3 wins, 7 draws, and 1 loss (FIDE earlier forfeited the match to Ribli due to some FIDE and Soviet politics). The match was played in London. Smyslov had been a Candidate for the world championship longer than anyone else, 33 years from 1950 to 1983.
In 1983, he wrote *125 Selected Games*. This was a translation of the Russian *V poiskakh harmonii* (In Search of Harmony), which he wrote in 1979.
In March-April 1984, Smyslov lost to Garry Kasparov in the Candidates finals, 8.5 to 4.5 (Smyslov lost 4 and drew 9 games). The match was played in Vilnius.
During the match, Smyslov celebrated his 63rd birthday and Kasparov celebrated his 21st birthday. Smyslov was 42 years older than Kasparov, or three times his age.

In June 1984, Smyslov played board 4 in the USSR vs. Rest of the World match in London. He lost one game and drew one game to Ljubojevic. Smyslov was later replaced by Tukmakov, who won one game and drew one game against Ljubojevic.

In 1985, Smyslov took part in the Candidates tournament in Montpellier. He went on to play in three more Interzonals (1987, 1990, and 1993).

In 1988, Smyslov played in his last USSR Championship, the 55th USSR Championship in Moscow, at the age of 67. He was the oldest player to have played in a Soviet championship.

In 1990, Smyslov played in the Manila Interzonal and tied for 48th place.

In October 1991, Smyslov tied for 1st place (8.5/11) at the first Senior World Championship, held in Bad Worishofen, Germany. He was 70 years old.

In 1996, at the age of 75, Smyslov produced his first CD of Russian romances.

In 1996, Smyslov played 13-year-old International Master (later Grandmaster) Etienne Bacrot in a match in France. The age difference was 62 years.
In 1997, Smyslov wrote *Vasily Smyslov: Endgame Virtuoso*.
In 1997, Smyslov played in the FIDE World Championship Knockout in Groningen, but lost to Alexander Morozovich, 2-0.

On May 23, 2001, Smyslov sang at the Bolshoi Theater in celebration of Anaoly Karpov's 50th birthday.

In 2001, Smyslov was unable to play competitive chess due to his failing eyesight. His eyesight was so bad, his wife had to tell him the moves, so he played his games from memory. He later turned into a problem composer.
At age 80, he had an Elo rating of 2494. His last tournament was the 2001 Klompendans Veterans vs Ladies tournament in Amsterdam, where he scored 50%.

Smyslov played competitive chess for 66 years (1935 to 2001). Perhaps only Reshvesky played longer, 74 years (1917-1991).
By 2002, Smyslov was completely blind but still enjoyed composing chess problems.
In 2003, Smyslov wrote *Smyslov's Best Games, Volume I: 1935-1957*.
In early 2010, Smyslov was ill and bedridden. In February, his wife suffered a fall and was hospitalized. Smyslov himself was not being helped or cared for.
Smyslov was admitted to the emergency room by ambulance at Botkin Hospital in Moscow in late March after complaing of heart pains. He was in serious condition with coronary heart disease and atrial fibrillation.
Smyslov died of heart failure on the early morning of March 27, 2010 at a Moscow hospital, three days after his 89th birthday. He lived longer than any other world chess champion.
Smyslov is survived by his wife, Nadezhda Andreevna.
A funeral service was held at the chess club on Gogolevsky in Moscow.
Smyslov was a World Championship Candidate in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

In Chess Olympiad play, Smyslov won 69 games, drew 42, and
only lost 2 games in 9 Olympiads. He won a total of 17 Chess Olympiad medals, an all-time record. He played in the Chess Olympiads of 1952, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1970, and 1972.

In world championship play, Smyslov has won 24 games,
drawn 44 games, and lost 21 games. His peak rating has
been 2690.

Smyslov played in 19 USSR championships.
He took 3rd in the 12th USSR Ch in 1940 (won by Lilienthal and Bondarevsky)
He took 2nd in the 13th USSR Ch in 1944.
He took 10th-11th in the 14th USSR Ch in 1945.
He took 3rd-4th in the 15th USSR Ch in 1947.
He took 1st-2nd with Bronstein in the 17th USSR Ch in 1949.
He took 5th in the 18th USSR Ch in 1950.
He took 4th in the 19th USSR Ch in 1951
He took 7th-9th in the 20th USSR Ch in 1952.
He took 1st-2nd with Geller in the 22nd USSR Ch in 1955.
He took 7th-8th in the 27th USSR Ch in 1960.
He took 5th-6th in the 28th USSR Ch in 1961.
He took 8th in the 29th USSR Ch in late 1961.
He took 10th-12th in the 34th USSR Ch in 1967.
He took 3rd-5th in the 37th USSR Ch in 1969.
He took 2nd-3rd in the 39th USSR Ch in 1971.
He took 15th the 41st USSR Ch in 1973.
He took 6th-7th in the 44th USSR Ch in 1976.
He took 12th-14th in the 45th USSR Ch in 1977.
He took 9th-13th in the 55th USSR Ch in 1988, at the age of 67.

From 1939 to 2001, he played 2,656 match and tournament games. He won 919 games, lost 294 games and drew 1,442 games. He has had more 2600-plus performances than any other player.

He played in over 100 tournament. His major successes were:
1st at Zagreb 1955, 1st at the Alekhine Memorial in Moscow 1956,
1st at Moscow 1960 and 1963, 1st at Havana 1965, 1st at Monte Carlo 1969,
1st at Graz 1984, and 1st at Rome 1988.
Chessmetrics had Smyslov in the top 20 in the world from 1943 to 1978. He was in the top 10 in the world from 1946 to 1970. He was either number one or number two in the world from 1953 to 1959.

Smyslov was a baptized Russian Orthodox Christian, and one of the few strong chess players to be deeply religious. He never joined the Communist Party because of his religion. He believed in predestination and the predictions of Nostrodamus. He once said that Enrico Caruso appeared to him in one of his dreams and corrected his singing style.
In 1968, Stanly Kubrick, a chess player, created a Russian character called Dr. Smyslov, for the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey.
In 1977, a recently discovered asteroid (1977 EC2) was named Smyslov in honor of Vasily Smyslov. The minor planet was discovered by N.S. Chernykh at Nauchnyj.
One of his more famous quotes of his was "I will play 40 good moves. If you can play 40 good moves, we will draw."
A good article and list of references on Smyslov can be found at The Week in Chess at http://www.chess.co.uk/twic/chessnews/obituaries/vasily-smyslov-1921-2010
A partial record of his tournaments and matches are here:
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