

## 16. National Master Bruce Monson Reads Bent Larsen's Memories of the 1966 Piatigorsky Cup

National Master Bruce Monson, born 1967, has long been known as one of the best players in Colorado where he works as a firefighter. The author of a book on the Belgrade Gambit and a contributor to *Pasadena 1932*, Monson is known as an outstanding chess archivist skilled at finding long lost historical information. He is currently at work on books on the Piatigorsky Cups and Herman Steiner. Here, he reads Bent Larsen's reminiscences about the 1966 Piatigorsky Cup tournament.

Bent Larsen was one of the greatest chess players in the world in the 1960s and 1970s, qualifying for the Candidate Matches four times and reaching the semi-finals on three occasions. His fearless style was perfect for winning tournaments and was particularly successful in the late 1960s which led him to be placed on board 1 for the world ahead of Bobby Fischer in its match with the U.S.S.R. in 1970. Larsen was not only a great player, but also an outstanding writer. His book, *Larsen's Selected Games of Chess: 1948-1969*, is recognized as a classic.

Bruce Monson: The title of his essay is *Oh Yes, I Remember It Well*, and he is referring to Maurice Chevalier who sang also with a French accent. So the title, he says, is his and [he writes], "For Jacqueline, I wish you a long life. You have music and chess and that's already a good beginning."

### *Oh Yes, I Remember It Well*

It was my second visit to the United States. The first had been to Dallas in 1957 and I had to get my fingerprints. In '66, that was not so because the Soviets felt it humiliating. The biggest pact was already at work - the understanding between the two superpowers. They did not want to start a disaster by mistake. What Dallas could not, the Piatigorskys could. The Soviet Union sent two representatives in '63 and again in '66. There were some problems, but they were solved, like in Zurich in 1959. But why talk only about individual tournaments? Why not remember the team events?

It started during the war as a suggestion from Washington D.C. After all, who won the chess Olympiads in the 1930s? Yes, the U.S. In 1939, it was very sad. They could not raise the necessary funds to attend the Olympiad. Anyway, the Allies in Moscow liked the idea of a radio match. But it was still war, let us beat the enemy first. When that was done the famous radio match in 1945, it showed the pyramid with Soviets on top. In 1940, the Chess Federation of the U.S.S.R. had a million players organized - much later it was 2 million under Yakov Rokhlin. To compare, in 1940, the recently created U.S.C.F. had only a thousand members and was practically bankrupt. Even so, this new idea of team matches was not completely forgotten, but they did not happen for other reasons: the Cold War, the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, etc. In 1954, the Soviet team made a scandal in New York. They almost went home. It was all right to have limited mobility in the U.S.; for instance, in the Soviet Union, Novosibirsk was

absolutely forbidden to U.S. citizens, off limits. But they had forgotten to mention this nice place, really little more than a *dacha* where the Soviet ambassador to the U.N. spent his weekends. It was outside the limits of the Big Apple. Of course, what I remember most is the scandal, but I think the solution was a reasonable one. I remember a photo of the honorable guest at the entrance to the wonderful place in the country [referring to Glen Cove, Long Island].

In November 1957, the tension was so high that allowing the famous Russians in the Dallas/Fort Worth area was an impossibility, so that tournament went on without any Soviets. I don't recall who said, "In Los Angeles, it might have been a possibility." Of course, life is much easier for a Dane, so Uncle Sam now gave me permission for the rest of my life to solicit entry an unlimited number of times. I later carried that visa over from one passport to the next, but in the 1990s, the Uncle cancelled this agreement unilaterally, he did not ask me.

Oh yes, the tournament. It was well-organized and the Piatigorskys were wonderful hosts. He was an old elephant, and to hear him play the cello was something unforgettable. She was a more nervous animal, maybe a deer. She did not delegate well. She did many small things herself, and invented a new kind of demonstration board, which was real progress. And who had to tell the assistants, "The insurance pays that." It was a dentist who presented a bill for \$517. A drug addict got very angry when he could not enter. He went away, but came back with something big made of iron. The young man might have been killed.

Are we comparing with famous tournaments in Europe? Well, you would be surprised how unfriendly most of them were to spectators. Here, there was a commentators room. On a couple of the big days, it was too small. Nobody had really foreseen such a crowd. What do I mean "big day?" One of them was on July 31, and the tournament director Isaac Kashdan happened to be close to a phone, which rang that morning. He found himself in the role of press secretary with an important TV person on the other end.

[He answered,] "Hello, this is Kashdan."

[The reporter replied,] "Oh, I am in luck. I am so and so and you are the right person. I don't know so much about chess, but I understand that today our Bobby [Fischer] plays the World Champion [Tigran] Petrosian."

"That is correct," says Kashdan.

The reporter asked, "Then we can call this the most important match so far?"

"You certainly can," says Kashdan. "It decides who will be in last place after the first half."

Larsen continues, I don't know the rest but they came.

Back to the commentary room. Was it there in the venerable Hastings? No, but there was a press bulletin room, and I have heard Ritzson Murray shout something very loud when he was already in the tournament hall. In Beverwijk? No, but the bulletin room was located more discreetly and it was a cozy place. I like to watch them work, Barry Widious and [inaudible]. Well enough. But was I satisfied? Of course not. The sun, the California summer was too much for me. The same happened in Havana a couple of months later. Before I had really finished my explanation in my ridiculous Spanish, the doctor had put the apparatus on my arm.

[The doctor said,] "Yes, the organizers. They won't listen to me. They set up the air conditioning too strong. So I have all these chess masters coming to me. Look, your blood pressure is 142, you don't play today."

[Larsen replied,] "I have to play, doctor."

"Hm. But you come to me after the round, and it is really irresponsible conduct of the leaders of your federation to send you to such a different climate without a medical check. It makes me angry."

After the game, I had only gone up to 145 on my blood pressure, but I played badly. What else? A thousand things, but much more interesting for me than my readers I suppose. For example, it was nice to see Artie Zeller again. He was in the car with Larry Evans, Pal Benko, and little me when we went from Dallas to Los Angeles in 1957. "Well," says Artie, "I stayed on the coast. I make a living as a photographer now." He looked satisfied and so did his wife. But who was Artie? Remember Mae West and her troop of strong men? Artie was one of the troop. I think the show was called "Mr. Universe." I never met Mae, but I understand from Artie and later many others that she was quite a woman.

Or let me try this one about [Jan] Hein Donner walking up Wilshire Blvd around 9:00pm. Maybe I must interject that Hein had become a handsome man with a beautiful beard. That was not so for example in 1954. His plumage was a strange disorder, but now he walked up the longest street in the world. There were three places where you could buy a used car and too, those who were potential piano buyers. After a twenty minutes' walk, you found a tremendous mart open twenty four hours where you could buy a loaf of bread, but maybe halfway on the left side, there was a tempting sign: Bar. It really said, "Bar to the left, [inaudible] restaurant to the right." Maybe Hein was thirsty, but above all he was a child with a very developed curiosity. So he tried to enter and turn left, but a uniform person of the male gender stopped him.

[The uniformed person stated,] "No, no, stop. You know you have to show me some personal documents."

"But please," says Hein, "my passport is at the hotel in the safe."

"All very nice, but you youngsters all look the same."

“But sir, I am thirty-eight!”

After a closer look [the uniformed man said], “Okay you can go in. Nobody is capable to lie like that.”

Larsen continues. To me, this is funny even today. He was a friend. It is sad he had to leave so soon. I wanted to explain that I have already read Gliga’s [Svetozar Gligoric’s] essay. Beautiful. Especially the part about, at eighty-one, making music [was] his only concern. My own musical biography is different. I always loved music and I saw my mother’s love for piano, but I gave that instrument up when I was sixteen. So maybe. And about instruments, back to the cello. The most famous Danish cellist with Icelandic roots is Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. I promised to call him when I was back in Copenhagen. It was one of the first things. He was in the telephone book and he was at home. He answered the phone.

“Good afternoon, Professor, I am Bent Larsen and I bring you greetings from the Piatigorskys, but also a reminder.”

[Bengtsson replied,] “Yes, I know. I have been terribly busy these last months, but I promise at the beginning of next week I shall write them a good, long letter. You know, I spent three wonderful months at their home. They treated me like a son, but there is a problem with such people. It is difficult to give them gifts. I was lucky. I was going almost directly the Tchaikovsky Festival in Moscow. Gregor’s father was still alive and in good shape. So we traveled from Ukraine to Moscow, and I had the great pleasure of transmitting fresh greetings from his son and gave him some gifts. This was important for Gregor. They had not seen each other since 1916. As you may know, when the Revolution started, he was abroad with his professor. “