



*Photo courtesy of Zhanna Ta*

## "A Destiny of Happiness" - Mikhail Tal

Since my first meeting with Zhanna Tal, the daughter of the great Soviet chess player, I realized how fateful the meeting would become. After her return to Russia from Germany, I found her soul, open, vulnerable, but strong and forgiving. She was full with life's beauty and hungry for warmth – she opened to me in her interviews and I quickly wanted to learn more about her father. In Michael Tal, I wanted to understand how the genius of romantic chess passed to his daughter, and explore with her memories about her father, and what Tal could say about our times and the world he left in 1992.

All I knew about the "Pirate from Riga" is that he played a particular style known as romantic chess. This approach was absolutely fearless and he loved to take risks, while almost always winning matches against the best world-class players.

To understand the romanticism of Tal, we need to recall the era in which he lived - the late 50's and early 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USSR as chess became a national sport. International victories in chess competitions were one of the best examples of the intellectual superiority of Soviet people. Recognizing the

opportunity to showcase its champions, the state attached great importance to teaching the game to children from an early age. The Soviets also included chess in school activity and various special sports organizations because of the positive influence on intellectual development.

Winners of international tournaments, especially chess world championships, became idols of millions of Soviet people. Champions became an object of admiration, imitation, they were born on the arms of cheering crowds - adored as true heroes of intellectual battles. It is worth seeing the footage of the arrival in Riga of Tal the young world chess champion - a crowd of fans carrying a car with Tal in their arms! What a time! Young world champion Mikhail Tal was but 23 years old!

I asked Zhanna many questions about her father and her life with him during those times. Here are some questions and her responses:

Galima: Zhanna, did your father take offense at the fact that the state left practically nothing to him from the prizes and awards that he brought back after victories in the tournaments?

Zhanna: No, never. In the late 80's Gary Kasparov already complained that 99% of the prize money went to the Sports Committee in the USSR. But my father did not care about this circumstance, he was convinced that everything is fair, the state has the right to this money because it made it possible for people like him to participate in tournaments, and supported their preparation to compete at the highest level. In general, he was far from the world of material interests. He lived in the world of chess. I remember that our television broke down, a very ancient "Ruby", which worked from morning till night without breakdowns until 1985. Mom took out of Papa's fee, which he brought from the tournament in Canada, two bills and we bought a Japanese Sharp television in "Berezka." As a result, we got a scolding from Dad ... He was not attached to the material world. Even a wallet you would not find among his things, he shoved money in his pockets, and all this fell out on the counter table when it was necessary to pay, rubles mixed with dollars, pounds, and francs.

Galima: Did you get this attitude about money from your Dad?

Zhanna: I, unlike my Dad, have nothing to spend (laughs). And I do not save anything.

Galima: How did Mikhail Nehemievich endure the disintegration of the USSR?

Zhanna: He was dying together with the country in which his life was going on, and he did not accept the country that appeared after 1991. Although he could remember many injustices, all these anonymous letters, he was forced to write some reports of his travel abroad, often the state refused to allow him to travel abroad to international tournaments. Sometimes I stayed as collateral. I was released and allowed to travel together only once with my parents, to Bulgaria.

He did not like to talk about politics, especially in recent years, although he took to heart keenly the processes that led to the collapse of the USSR. "People's Front," a nationalist party in Latvia fighting for independence, tore the template completely. Soviet Riga slowly but surely turned into something else. And Dad fell into absolute silence about it all. When his former friends say that Dad was for the "People's Front," for the independence of Latvia - this is a lie!

We had friends - from all social strata, engineers, workers. There was no snobbery in him. He could bring at night from the airport a man who looked like a prisoner, introduce himself as Kolyuney, and leave him to spend the night at our home. This is not a joke, and it happened once in Moscow. Kolyunia was a guest in our house for two years. We never quite understood who the man was exactly.

And the atmosphere in the house was so warm, unconstrained and soaked with intelligence that the workers, professors, engineers - all sat at the same table just like brothers. This was a mixed, true brotherhood. And a full international family. Among our friends there were also Latvians, but with the Latvian "national character" we communicated only a little.

The growing excitement in the country, endless discussions on TV, much was unclear during those times. But all this was ruining his world. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Dad was already very ill. Everything was dying - the country, and together with it my father. My parents were advised by our friends from the KGB to take me away from Latvia for a while. A mix between a Jewess, a

Russian and a Pollack - I'll be the first stood up against the wall. My father knew that I would not be happy in a foreign country. Perhaps, there was a hope in him that after my studies at the conservatory everything would be settled and I could return. He left with that era. I'm glad that he did not survive to watch the collapse of the chess world, which happened later. Why did Dad leave so early? For a long time I tried to understand the reason, I searched for it for a long time. There is a wonderful book by Antarova - "Two Lives," and there is a passage explaining, perhaps, at least in part, why he left this World so early. Maybe he outgrew his potential on this Earth, and he just needed a broader, more important sphere for its application now.

Galima: You are talking now about the collapse of the chess world. How did it show itself?

Zhanna: Earlier in chess, the most important thing was human intellect, and now – it is a computer. The computer killed everything. The human factor, chess as the battle of the strongest intellects, the struggle of the characters, everything is gone, there is no romance of the live battle of the cleverest rivals.

Previously, everything was beautiful in the sport, because people competed. And now even in figure skating a living person is very small. Look at tennis, especially female - it's horror! Everything is technical, everything is powerful, but there is no beauty of naturalness. Computer and commerce killed chess and real sport. So Mickhail Tal was the Last of the Mohicans of the Romantic era in chess.

Galima: Do you remember what impressions your father brought from his foreign trips?

Zhanna: From every trip he brought impressions. But very fleeting, as he went to play and was not a tourist. He liked America, I was then 12 years old, I remember he said that everything is fine there, but when we asked if he could live there, he replied emphatically - no! All these cities - London, Paris, New York - remained in his memory as small episodes against the backdrop of great chess battles.

Dad could be an example of a genius so remote from ordinary life that it is difficult to remember when we were going out with him, for example, to the theater. I remembered twice - one performance in the Theater for Young Spectators -

"Scarlet Sails," and the second in the puppet theater for the "adult play." That's all where I went with him when I was a kid.

He was very fond of classical music - Rachmaninov, Chopin, Bach. He also loved the stage, and Vysotsky, Pugacheva, Leontiev, and many other stars of the Russian stage. He liked to listen as well to music from Bony M, ABBA, and even Jewish ensembles such as Kol Aviv and Talil, as they sounded in the background of the house. The library was huge, books were everywhere. But there was no dissident literature at all. Even if something appeared, they did not stay at home. Everything was read, including the "Children of Arbat," and much more. But, it did not reach us, it did not "go" either to me or to my parents, and these books either disappeared or lay on the upper shelves. The only book from dissident literature, which we reread together as the whole family many times - it was the "Sorrowful Mockingbird" by the brothers Shargorodsky. But, there emigration and dissident everyday life were presented exactly as they really are - full of nostalgia, tragic humor and boredom.

The psychological state of Dad markedly changed together with waves of social changes in the Soviet Union, he became closed and depressed. He visited Israel and he liked it, but he did not want to live there. He was offered a lot of money if he would move there. I was promised a conservatory placement without an exam ... but my father flatly refused. Absolutely clear, No.

Galima: Do you remember any phrases of your father now when you are very sad or when you are happy?

Zhanna: No. I knew that when I was very sad, it was enough for me to cuddle up to him, and all, all the anxieties were coming to an end. Now I can do this only mentally.

We talked with him a lot, but the letters were very rare. There were just a few letters. Even to my Mom he wrote only 2 letters during the time of their dating.

I decided to return from Germany to Riga, my homeland, and then move on to Moscow, and I know that my father would approve of my choice. He would understand how cold it was to me in Germany, it's cold not only physically, it's

cold to the soul. He had known this cold since the wave of it came to the Baltics in 1987.

Interview by Galima Galiullina

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Links:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/29/us/mikhail-tal-a-chess-grandmaster-known-for-his-daring-dies-at-55.html>