

My Most Memorable Interviews

**35 CONVERSATIONS
WITH CHESS STARS**

Gert Devreese

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Preamble

Long, written interviews: they still exist!

*Jeroen van den Berg,
Tournament Director Tata Steel Chess Tournament*



*Jeroen van den Berg
(photo by Jurriaan Hoefsmit)*

Preparing, conducting and writing out long and readable interviews is a craft that seems to be slowly disappearing with the passing of time. Afterall, everything has to be done faster and faster these days. And the influence of social media is huge. Fortunately, there are still the necessary exceptions: several newspapers post full-page interviews (or even longer, but usually in the weekend editions), so for enthusiasts like myself, there is still the possibility to enjoy long, written interviews. Still, I have a certain fear that such long stories are going to disappear. Or return only in book form, for the target audience that loves them.

Partly for this reason, it is gratifying that Gert Devreese has published his best and most beautiful chess interviews in book form! I hope that young people will also enjoy this, because the dynamic between a trained interviewer and an interesting interviewee is shown to its best advantage in the written word. Gert interviewed virtually all the top chess players for both his newspaper *De Standaard* and for the Dutch magazine *Schaakmagazine*.

The latter magazine is also an interface between Gert and myself. When I was still making interviews myself, with the same drive that Gert still has, I was once in Leon,

Spain for *Schakend Nederland* (the predecessor of *Schaakmagazine*) for the Advanced Chess Duel Kasparov–Topalov. I preferred to make my stories as long as possible – just as Gert still does. It was June 1998. The two players were allowed to use a computer as an aid, which was an interesting experiment at the time, because the computer was not yet as strong as it is now.

The final score was 3-3 and Gert and I met in the press room. We talked about chess players, chess in general and the influence of the computer. But we also talked about sports and especially about soccer, because soccer was a common interest of ours, as it soon became clear. So an appointment was made to watch the Belgium-the Netherlands match somewhere together. This match was scheduled during that period when we were in sunny Leon.

The match ended 0-0. We had several beers in the meantime and talked again about our profession. It was a pleasant evening.

A year later I became the tournament director at Wijk aan Zee, which I still am today. I then consciously chose to give up all my chess journalism work and opted definitively for the organizational side – a choice I have never regretted, although I did continue to do interviews with footballers for a long time. These were usually long stories too, because that interest remained.

By a special kind of coincidence, Gert took over my role as interviewer for the KNSB chess magazine after I stopped there. Precisely for that reason it was so nice that we had already met in Leon in 1998. And fortunately he did that job with an enormous passion, so chess lovers from Belgium and the Netherlands have been able to enjoy his stories for about twenty years now.

I like the fact that a publisher has now been found to compile his best stories. The biggest names pass by: Kasparov, Karpov, Timman, Carlsen, Polgar, Kortchnoi, Anand, Caruana, Giri, Hou Yifan... This is just a sample, all portrayed at a time when they were in the spotlight in one way or another.

The power of a good interviewer is that he prepares well. And that is what Gert does. Moreover, he is also conscientious in the elaboration of his stories. He checks facts and calls or emails the interviewee if something is not clear to him or needs explanation.

I hope the reader enjoys reading this book.

Amsterdam, December 2021.

Jeroen van den Berg

Preamble From The Author

Wijk aan Zee, the Place to be



Gert Devreese (photo by Daniël Vanheirzeele)

In the small Dutch village of Wijk aan Zee, not far from the metropolis of Amsterdam, a good half of the 35 interviews in this book with world champions and top chess players came about. This is no coincidence: Wijk aan Zee is a small coastal village with only two thousand inhabitants, but at the same time it is world famous because in the month of January, all the greats of the chess world make their appearance there and it then becomes the “Ultimate Chess Village of the World”.

Wijk aan Zee is inextricably connected with the smoke of Tata Steel, with many kilometers of North Sea beach, chess cafes like De Zon and Sonnevank, a plate of steaming pea soup (*‘snert’ in Dutch, ed.*) in De Moriaan.

And in the streets you can cross paths with the world’s chess players as if they were ordinary people.

As a chess journalist I have always been fascinated by the intriguing personalities of these top chess players. Of course, I too ask questions about the hot chess topics of the day, but I try, if the space allows, to model a kind of portrait of the world’s top players. I want to drill down a little deeper – I ask them about their relationships with their greatest rivals, how and why they became chess players in their youth, about the highs and lows of their careers...

And then it need not only be about chess in itself – Peter Leko will tell you that he could have become a top footballer at Bayern Munich as well as a top chess player at the same Bayern Munich; Judit Polgar will tell you that as a teenage chess star she wondered if her own eyes hadn’t deceived her when she thought that Kasparov had just touched that horse at the top tournament of Linares; Garry Kasparov will tell you with all his ardor that as a political opponent he will not rest until Vladimir

JUSTIFICATION

I have taken the liberty of placing under the chapter 'world champions' also two absolute chess greats, who never officially carried the title of world champion. I have my reasons for that.

Judit Polgar, without any discussion the best female chess player of all time, never became world champion, but she is definitely a unique champion. Indeed, at an early age Judit decided that she wanted to participate only in men's tournaments and turned her back on women's chess completely. There is no doubt that Judit Polgar would have easily captured the women's world title if she had participated in a women's World Championship. Indeed, in Judit's heyday, her rating towered over that of other top female players. If you put Hou Yifan and Alexandra Kosteniuk among the world champions - and rightly so, since they both captured the women's world title - then you simply cannot put the much stronger Judit Polgar in another chapter.

The late **Viktor Kortchnoi** never won the world title in men's. But Viktor the Terrible was very proud of his famous nickname: 'The best chess player ever who never became world champion'. And this honorary title certainly did not come out of nowhere. Kortchnoi played three World Championship matches against Anatoly Karpov, and lost all three. But in the 1978 World Championship match in Baguio, Kortchnoi came close, after an unparalleled comeback from 2-5 to 5-5, before finally biting the dust with 5-6. No other chess player than Kortchnoi belonged to the world top for such a long time: even after his seventieth birthday, he was still regularly ranked in the FIDE Top 100, and at 78 he became champion of Switzerland. The interview with Kortchnoi also just had to be near the interview with his arch-rival Karpov, for all these reasons...

Gert Devreese

Putin is driven from power; Magnus Carlsen is proud that his famous chess app Play Magnus is now only unavailable in two countries around the world, namely North Korea and South Sudan; Hikaru Nakamura will tell you that he has no friends amongst the world's top, also because of his typically American winner's mentality; and Jennifer Shahade will talk with fire about how devastatingly difficult it is still for women, minorities and the LGBT in the chess world...

Wijk aan Zee forms the ideal setting for that kind of profound, often long conversations. I did not want to simply have a quick superficial chat with the players in the press room at Wijk aan Zee, as some of my colleagues did. Once, when Kramnik's second Joël Lautier was explaining the Cold War between Kasparov's and Kramnik's camps, I had no choice: it was a memorable interview, but it was far from easy to



Overview of the tournament hall of the Tata Steel tournament (photo by Frans Peeters)

concentrate on our conversation, while at the same time a mishmash of players were chatting loudly to each other about their recently finished games. So in *Wijk* I asked either for a separate interview room around the tournament hall where I could have a real conversation with a player undisturbed, or I made an appointment in the hotel – at *Het Hoge Duin* or the top players' resort at *Zeeduin*. These good conditions certainly contributed to the success of many interviews.

Living Legends

During the realization of most of the interviews in this book I was also fortunate that most of the top chess players were easy to approach, did not have any attitude and were usually open to an interview. Most of them, that is. But there were also the real Living Legends. Like Magnus (what's in a name?) Carlsen. When Magnus was a rising star in his twenties, I could interview him alone at *Wijk aan Zee*. But in recent years Carlsen has adopted the habit at tournaments of only allowing one interview session with a few journalists at the same time in the same room. I have always turned down these invitations. For me, a good interview must happen face-to-face, one-on-one; I want to be able to determine the scenario of the interview

myself, and make adjustments if necessary. The interview with Carlsen in this book is one of those, because at the tournament in Leuven, Belgium, I was fortunate enough to catch Carlsen separately.

And then there is *The Boss* – Garry Kasparov himself. I myself will never forget one particular moment with Kasparov. There was a very pleasant atmosphere in the press room at Wijk aan Zee – was it 1999, 2000 or 2001? The players were sitting around after their games laughing and joking with each other. There was an exuberant atmosphere. Suddenly, however, all the conversations fell silent and a deadly hush ensued. How comes? Garry Kasparov, after his long game, had suddenly entered the press room. In one second it became crystal clear to me: there was Kasparov, and then there were the others. This is a theme that comes up several times in the conversations in this book.

Kasparov was a special case, also for journalists. During his pro career, I only had the opportunity to interview Kasparov separately once, coincidentally during the Advanced Chess Match against Topalov, which also turns up in the Foreword by the Tata tournament director Jeroen van den Berg. But after his pro career, to my delight, Kasparov suddenly became much more accessible to journalists: he wrote many books, and wanted to put his political fight with Putin in the spotlight. As a result, I was able to ask him, albeit many years later, the key questions about his first five-month marathon match with Karpov, questions that had been on my mind for a long time.

Zoom

In conclusion: the interviews in this book span an over twenty years, over two decades. For years I went with my recording device to tournaments like Wijk aan Zee, Frankfurt Chess Classic, Hoogeveen... often to interview the interesting player of the moment in some hotel bar or quiet interview room. Most of the 35 interviews came about this way. That is... until March 2020, when out of nowhere, covid broke out. Suddenly chess tournaments were no longer held and a live interview with chess players was no longer possible.

At first I was very skeptical about doing an online interview – how on earth could it delve as deep as a live interview with a chess player at a tournament? But soon I discovered the great possibilities of the Zoom-interview. Sound and facial expressions are as good on a Zoom-interview as they are in real life. And while such an interview may not take place in the same room, it totally feels like it does.

Anna-Maja Kazarian was in the Netherlands on her screen, David Navara was in Prague for his Zoom, and the American Jennifer Shahade was even on the other side of the Atlantic – and in the middle of the interview she even put her son Fabi (almost 4 then) on her lap to say “hello” to the interviewer. It always felt like they were sitting in my living room. In terms of intensity, these Zoom-interviews can easily stand alongside tournament interviews. And coincidentally or not, at the time of full covid, my 20-year-old recording device suddenly gave up the ghost.

I wish you all a lot of reading pleasure and many new discoveries while reading my interviews.

Gert Devreese
Evergem (Belgium)
September 2022

PART I

World Champions

Viktor the Terrible Won't Stop Until He's 80

“I HAVEN'T DISCOVERED ANYTHING HUMAN IN KARPOV YET”



Viktor Kortchnoi (photo by Jos Suttmuller)

Unbelievable but true. Sworn enemies Kortchnoi and Karpov recently played on the same team. Otherwise, Viktor the Terrible has not changed his opinion of Karpov: “What is he allowing himself to do now by blowing up the 3K tournament on his own! Karpov is a professional criminal, the hooligan of chess. Nothing has changed. Karpov was, is and always will be the same!”

The ex-Russian Viktor Kortchnoi (70) is the ultimate Living Legend of Chess. He has known all the top chess players since the Second World War, from Botvinnik and Tal via Fischer and Petrosian to Karpov and Kasparov.

Kortchnoi is especially infamous for his lost matches against Anatoly Karpov, two of which were for the world title ('78 and '81), which left him with a deep trauma. After the match of '78, he even filed a lawsuit against Karpov and FIDE because of "the intolerable circumstances in which he had had to play". Those matches with Karpov had an extra dramatic dimension, because in '76 Kortchnoi had defected to the West and since then had been boycotted by the Soviet Union and branded a traitor. Kortchnoi: "If I had won Baguio '78, the Soviets would have killed me."

While twenty-somethings rule the roost around him, Kortchnoi continues to win tournaments even at the age of seventy. Kortchnoi is an interviewer's ultimate dream, because he always openly states his convictions. He does the same in Hoogeveen, the Netherlands, where he spoke about the phenomenon of his long chess career, saying: "I can't imagine ever playing too badly".

In 1962, the American Bobby Fischer claimed that in the Candidates tournament in Curaçao, the Russians played quick draws among themselves to be fresh for their games with the American.

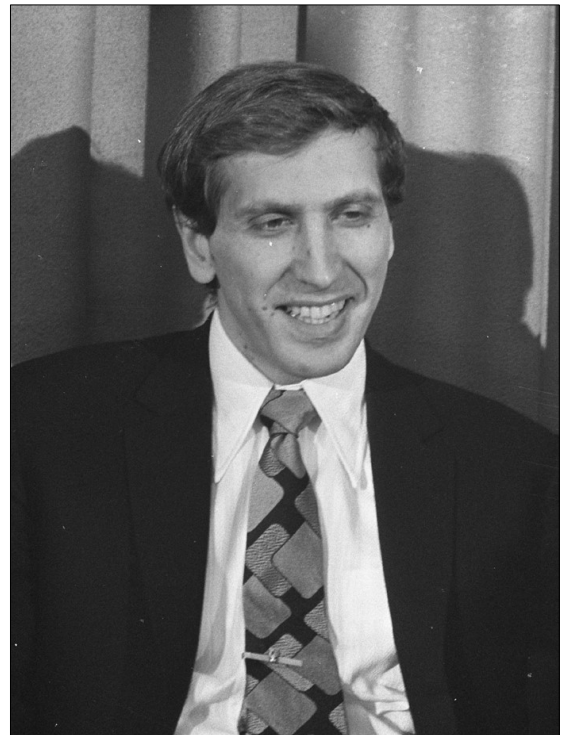
'It was Fischer who started talking about the Russians' plot against him. But it is not clear against whom that plot was directed. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that that plot was not directed against Fischer, but against me!

After all, I had been the object of a plot before. And the group that took action against me on that occasion consisted mainly of Geller and Petrosian. Okay, Fischer was a citizen of another state, a country in which one has and had the freedom to express suspicion. But I was a citizen of the Soviet Union, I couldn't say a word about it! *(laughs)*

It is to Fischer's great merit that he published that plot in Curaçao, which had been organized by three people: Geller, Petrosian and Keres. Without any doubt, the initiator was Petrosian, because the basic idea of the plot was that Petrosian himself would become world champion. And he indeed became world champion in 1963. But was this plot really directed against me? It is perhaps more accurate to say that it was devised against three players: it is quite possible that they also wanted to hit Tal, in addition to Fischer and myself. But fortunately for Petrosian and Co., Tal fell ill during the tournament and had to withdraw from the competition.

You had great respect and sympathy for the young Bobby Fischer. Were you friends?

I had indeed a lot of respect for the young Fischer. Whether we were really friends, I don't know. We had a reasonably good relationship all those years. When I fled the Soviet Union and undertook a simultaneous tour of America, I met Fischer in the US. That must have been in 1977, in Pasadena. At that time, we got on friendly terms. But later, Fischer started to say everywhere that all Kortchnoi's matches were fixed from beginning to end and he gave interviews in which he posited incredible things. When they asked him if he was an anti-Semite, he replied, "No, I have nothing against Arabs!" In any case, I did not think it was very wise of Fischer to play that re-match with Spassky in (ex-) Yugoslavia in 1992. At that time, almost all the civilized world had a boycott against ex-Yugoslavia. Fischer had a choice: he could play in Germany or in Spain and for the same money as in ex-Yugoslavia. But he chose the money of that swindler Vasiljevic, who paid the players, but then ran away.



Bobby Fischer

"Fischer and I went for regular consultations with the same Swedish doctor. That doctor once said to me: 'You seem normal to me, Mr Kortchnoi, but Fischer strikes me as a potential patient for the insane asylum.' The man said that back in '62!"

What do you think went wrong with Fischer?

Look, in 1962, Fischer won the Stockholm Interzonal tournament brilliantly. During that tournament, I had regular contact with a Swedish doctor, to whom Fischer and I went for consultations. In one of those conversations, the doctor told me: "You seem normal to me, Mr Kortchnoi, but Fischer seems to me to be a potential patient for the madhouse". The man said that back in '62!

PETROSIAN



Tigran Petrosian

In the 1960's, Tigran Petrosian was one of your biggest rivals and enemies. Why was that?

I suppose Petrosian must have been jealous, either of my chess talent or of certain aspects of my character. Petrosian himself was very talented at chess, but it was not in his character to show on the board all that was in his power.

Karpov gives another explanation for your rivalry with Petrosian: the Soviet authorities had asked you to lose your Candidates match against Petrosian in 1971. And you indeed lost that match against Petrosian.

No, there is no truth in those rumors. It is true that later on, the Soviet authorities wanted me to lose my match against Karpov. No, Petrosian was a different story. I don't know, I played that duel in a rather timid way and didn't manage to win a single game against Petrosian.

Playing like this is not in your nature, is it?

(repelling) Yes, that was a very strange duel.

In general, do you think certain matches between the Russians in the 1960's and 1970's were pre-arranged?

That is what Fischer has always claimed in his interviews. He has claimed that all matches between Karpov, Kortchnoi and Kasparov were fixed, that everything was arranged in advance. That is of course pure nonsense.

In the press, there have always been rumors and discussions about the Keres case. How in the world was it possible that Keres in that famous World Championship tournament in The Hague and Moscow in 1948 lost all his games against Botwinnik until the moment Botwinnik was sure of the world title? Then suddenly Keres was allowed to win against Botwinnik in their very last game. And even more remarkable: from then on, Keres beat Botwinnik almost everywhere, in almost all the games they played together. Something was clearly going on then. Keres was a young man and a chess professional in those days.



In the Second World War, his country Estonia, which had been occupied by the Soviets for about a year, was suddenly occupied by German troops. Keres was a professional chess player, he had to play chess for a living. Therefore he really had no choice but to play in tournaments organized by Hitler.

But ultimately, the Russians were among the victors of World War II. And this may be hard for a Western mind to grasp, but all the prisoners of war, all the Soviet soldiers who had been in German camps, when they were released from those camps, they were immediately sent to Siberia without any form of trial, for ten years! But the man who had played in the German chess tournaments, who had openly manifested his solidarity with the Hitler regime, was curiously not sent to Siberia. And that was the case while a third of the Estonian population was sent to the Siberian camps. Keres miraculously survived and very soon, in 1947, became chess

champion of the Soviet Union. Soviet champion, even though he could not yet speak Russian! I heard him speak on the Soviet radio after his victory, it was difficult to understand a word of it.

A few years later, Keres even became captain of the Soviet chess team at the Olympiad in 1952. A fantastic rise for that man, I must say! From near-prisoner to captain of the Soviet team. Because who was Keres just after the war? Someone who was 5 minutes away from the Siberian camps.

And where did Botvinnik stand, just after the Second World War? Botvinnik was EVERYTHING then. He had won an important tournament together with Capablanca in 1936 and had received a car as a reward from the Minister of Industry. Botvinnik then received congratulatory telegrams for his victory from everywhere, from the Russian government, from Joseph Stalin himself. Okay, Keres did not lose to Botvinnik at the World Championship in 1948 on orders, but the whole situation was so threatening to him then, that he just couldn't go full-on against Botvinnik then, he couldn't play to win then.

KARPOV

Kortchnoi (*now completely in the talking chair, ed.*): And then of course there is my match with Anatoly Karpov in 1974. Everything, really everything, was done to secure Karpov's victory. Every detail was taken into account. Karpov got the best location to relax, and he got the best trainers and seconds of the Soviet Union at his disposal. Every grandmaster in the Soviet Union had an obligation to help Karpov. If anyone dared to express his wish to help me, it was considered an open affront to the Russian State, to Russia as a whole. And it was made sure that all top chess players understood that message. If someone during the match with Karpov had the guts to shake hands, not with me, but with my wife, it was also regarded as an incredible affront to Russia.

In 1974, I was a member of the KP, the communist party. The head referee for my match with Karpov



*Anatoly Karpov
(photo by Jos Suttmuller)*

was the Belgian Alberic O'Kelly. They made a positive step by inviting me for a meeting with the referees beforehand. But there was also a big disadvantage to it for me. I had observed bad behavior by Karpov, but because I was a party member of the KP, I could not complain to a citizen of another state about the behavior of a fellow countryman. You just didn't do that as a party member, you couldn't do that. But I dared to complain about Karpov's behavior during the match anyway. I was punished for that after the match. There were several things in Karpov's behavior that I did not like. You have to remember that the guy was 20 years younger than me, but he still behaved as if he had already won the match. No matter what the score was, he behaved like the winner all the time. The whole Soviet world wanted Karpov to win our match. It all seemed already decided, while I wanted to make it a real fight.

"That brat was twenty years younger than me, but Karpov behaved the whole time as if he had already won the match. No matter what the score was. The whole Soviet world wanted Karpov to win our match. It all seemed to be decided already, while I wanted to make it a real fight."

An example: Karpov often showed up late for our games, but never felt the need to apologize for it. He behaved rudely in various ways, but I noticed that the referees apparently never noticed this. I then explained Karpov's rudeness in my statements to the umpires. When I lost that match, I was punished for it.

If you analyze my match with Karpov in '74, you'd conclude that I had so much experience then that I must somehow be able to display it in the games. But Karpov turned out to be so incredibly well-prepared that I didn't even manage to break through his first line of defense, which had been developed by himself and dozens of his helpers in their home analysis.

The Russians did everything they could in '74 to make my position impossible, to make it impossible to play chess normally. It was a form of psychological warfare. By the way, I'm sure they did the same thing to Kasparov years later.

In his autobiography, Kasparov says that he was asked to put himself entirely at Karpov's service in the early 1980's, at a time when he was becoming his most dangerous rival.

I know, I know. By the way, the same thing happened to me. When I was in a difficult position and had been punished by the Soviet Union, they invited me to help