A Conversation with Viktors Pupols

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Yasser Seirawan (seated) and Viktors Pupols at the 2012 U.S. Open, in a photo reenactment of the memorable January 1975 cover of Northwest Chess. *Photo credit: Jeffrey Roland.*

AB: *Do you mind going over the history of how you started playing chess and how it all happened?*

VP: I was seven years old, and I was rummaging through cabinets in the house. I came across this set and asked my father what it was. He told me it was a chess set, showed me how the pieces moved, and left it at that. So, after that, it was simply just a solitary pursuit.

AB: *Can you explain what it was like growing up in Latvia during the Soviet Union era?*

VP: Well, when I was in first grade, it was the Soviet Union that had occupied the country, and on the first of May, we were all given little flags to wave and go out there. If you lost the flag, being a first grader, the teachers would supply you with another flag. But on June 14, 1941, the city of Riga, which is about the size of Seattle, saw about 30,000 people deported because both Communist Russia and Nazi Germany had their lists of people they considered undesirables. With the Nazis, it was easier to tell who was on the list; with the Communists, it could be anybody, even denunciations by your neighbors. Although they had agreed to split Europe, about a year later, Hitler decided he hadn't had enough, so he invaded the country, and for the next three or four years, it was under German occupation.

AB: *How did you end up in the U.S.? What was the journey like, if you don't mind sharing?*

VP: By the end of the war, troop ships were coming in with soldiers and ammunition, and they were going back empty. So, everybody who did not want to experience Communist Russia again went west. On the last day of the war, I was actually at a point between the armies. I wasn't certain whether I would reach the Allied armies before the Russians; it was about a half-hour difference, and we were on foot. It was May 8.

I was ten years old, wearing a winter coat and carrying everything I could because that's what you had to do—carry whatever you had with you. Over the next five years, people like myself were in a refugee camp in Germany, in Allied zones. They were not called refugees because where would you be refugees from? Our allies, the Soviet Union? So, they were called displaced persons.

AB: *And when you came to the U.S. as a refugee, how did you survive?*

VP: See, when you come from a background like that, you don't have any relatives, friends, or network to rely on. So, you start gradually working your way up, you know, like two or three jobs. In your free time, you can still play chess if you have a mind to. And, of course, in those days, any chess activity would be on the east coast in New York or possibly in Los Angeles, and there was no air traffic. So, if you wanted to go to a place like that, it would take like two days by train or bus. Obviously, you didn't have the same kind of advantages that people have now. It used to be that you could have just coaches and training in golf or tennis; now it's possible in chess also. So, when Bobby Fischer played in the 1955 U.S. Junior Championship in Lincoln, Nebraska, he would have got there by train or bus over two days.

AB: *I want to go back to talking about Bobby Fischer, but I'd like to follow a chronological order. So, how did you end up choosing Seattle?*

VP: Well, after Nebraska, we found that the winters were okay, but the summers were humid and hot. So, we exchanged letters with other people, and they said the climate out on the west coast is much more agreeable. So, we got the car and went to Washington state. Been in Washington State since 1953.

AB: *And at that time what was the chess scene like in Washington state in 1953?*

VP: There were some tournaments; there was even the state championship also because I first played in the state championship in 1953. They were in the basement of a hotel downtown on Seventh and Madison. The freeway goes through there now, so there's nothing there. It was, let's say, a third-rate or fourth-rate hotel.

AB: *Did the Washington Chess Federation existed in 1953?*

VP: Yes, it did. But like I said, tournaments were more local because New York or Los Angeles were unreachable, even if you had the time and inclination. .

AB: *Tell me some stories of the 1955 U.S. Junior championship tournament?*

VP: Bobby was 12 at the time. By the time he was 15, he was not only the US champion but also competing for World Championships and so on. However, in that particular tournament, he drew most of his games. He was by himself and stayed with the tournament organizer's family. His mother told him on the telephone to keep going to San Diego to another tournament, but he was reluctant; he really didn't want to. That's another two or three days on the bus.

AB: *Did you had any interaction with Bobby Fischer beside the game?*

VP: Only in the sense that, you know, after hours we would be at the tournament organizer's home, and well, there wouldn't be any video games in those days. We probably played poker or something like that, and Bobby was sitting on the floor analyzing on his little chess set because he was younger than the rest of the people. Matter of fact, you know, there are stories like when he was between 12 and 15 and going to these tournaments, he didn't fit in well with people that were a few years older, so, you know, there were fights and crying.

AB: *What was Fischer's reaction after he lost the game? Did he cry? Did you analyze the game with him?*

VP: No, he didn't cry, but he looked like he might be close to that. He was down. And of course, I get the opportunity to rub it in, you know, and said, 'Your pawn, the black pawn, was on h3, and when you captured it, I could put my queen on the h-file, exchange queens, and win material. But if you had played king g1, drawn the pawn to h2, and then went to h1, that would not have happened.' Well, this is not a good analysis. It's an attempt to rub it in again! He did sign his score sheet. So yes, he's not illiterate, but it was in block letters!

AB: *When did you first go to The Last Exit on Brooklyn?*

VP: It would probably be around 1965 or 1970; that's roughly when the University District had... when the university didn't own all the property around there. So, you could have small businesses and small landholdings, and private houses, and so

on. By that time, I already had a job in Kitsap County, which is where I live now. So, you know, I would drive in and out just to go to The Last Exit to play chess. It was not a chess club, but it was kind of a hangout where all kinds of people went. You know, some that were activists, some that were stoners, and some that were professors.

AB: *I know Yasser Seirawan used to play a lot in The Last Exit, can you share some stories about him at the Exit?*

VP: Well, mainly we had an in-crowd; we knew each other, you know. Then all of a sudden, Yasser shows up, and he rides a bicycle in from Garfield High School, and he wants to play. Again, just like when there's an age difference, you kind of tease the person: 'Did you hear something? Was it under a table?' You know, 'Is there somebody under a table making comments about the game?' (laughs). But he was not offended. He was a nice kid, and so he simply, you know, learned what he could on the spot.

AB: *So you were kind of like his coach, in a sense, right?*

VP: We played probably more games than he has played with anybody else, and I probably have more wins against Yasser than anybody else has against him. But this was simply when he was moving up.

AB: *So, were these like blitz games?*

VP: Well, yes, there were clock games going on. There were some tournament games. As a matter of fact, there was one tournament in a state championship where everybody was like, 'Ah... Yasser, young prodigy!' you know, and paying a lot of attention to him. So, when it was my turn to play Yasser, I pretended to be half asleep and decrepit and kind of out of it, just to give him a contrast.

AB: *I heard a story where you hid the State Championship trophy after some disagreement. Do you mind sharing that story?*

VP: Well, they (WCF) had an activity requirement, and you had to play three tournaments in Washington state. I had played two tournaments and played to represent the state of Washington up in BC, a state versus province match, and they didn't count that. They said that I was disqualified because I had not met the activity requirement. I said, 'Okay, well, this probably would be '89,' which is, I think, the last time I won the state championship. So I said, 'If that's the case, you're not going to get your trophy back.' Eventually, cooler heads intervened about a year later or thereabouts, and so on. But in the meantime, yes, I had put the trophy in a plastic bag, and it was on an island in the Anacortes city forest lands in a lake.

AB: *I heard some interesting stories of you and Jim McCormick from back in the days. Do you mind sharing some stories about your relationship with him?*

VP: Well, he had a way of commenting on games because he would play the Sicilian Defense, and I would play long endgames, you know. So, he'd come back or come around from time to time and make a comment like, "So this is what he has come to after 40 moves of playing," and things like that, you know. So, I complained to the tournament director. No action was taken because I felt there was prejudice. On a couple of occasions, I would simply wait when there was no action by the tournament director. The next time this happened on Sunday at that round, I would hit him! But I would hit him at a particular moment when Bob Lundin, who is about as big as you or bigger, was close by and could separate us immediately so he couldn't hit back. There were several occasions like that because, after all, I feel that if you've exhausted the legal defenses, what else is left?

AB: *So this physical altercation happened during ongoing games?*

VP: Yes, during a tournament and while games were going on. There was one time the tournament was at the YMCA and was on the sixth floor, so between moves, I went down in an elevator and got a cup of coffee. Then I found out the elevator was not working, so I had to walk up six flights to get to the tournament room. Then I found out McCormick was holding the elevator door open. Well, there were incidents like that, you know. In the interest of fair play, what I like to do is exhaust the legal defenses, you know, and complain about it and see if there's any action. Just like, you know, if something happened to you, you'd probably call the police. If the police don't act, you call the mayor. If the mayor doesn't act, you go to the hospital, and you have to wait for nine hours or something like that. Well, in that case, it's basically up to you.

AB: *Did you play any famous players over the years you can share?*

VP: Over the years, I have played in 24 states and in four foreign countries. So, I've been to a lot of places to play chess. Matter of fact, the most interesting one might be... usually, I would leave work on Friday early afternoon and get back Monday early afternoon, and in the meantime, I could be anywhere. One time, I looked at the tournament calendar and had a choice of Berkeley or Muskogee, Oklahoma. Well, Berkeley is full of all kinds of zombies walking the streets and talking to themselves, but Muskogee, Oklahoma, well, that sounds good because there was a hit song at that time: "I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee, a place where even squares can have a ball, they still drink white lightning by the courthouse," and so on, you know. So, it was kind of like a counterculture against hippies. So yeah, Muskogee, yes, and yes, I went there, played in the tournament, and got back on Monday to go to work.

AB: *But did you play anyone famous like Mikhail Tal?*

VP: No, but I did play Viktor Korchnoi and, well, all the US Masters. There were three "B's" — Arthur Bisguier, Pal Benko, and Robert Byrne. I've beaten two of them, but not Robert Byrne. There were other grandmasters that I have played over the years, like Walter Browne. I didn't win all my games, but I have a win and several draws against Browne. I played Korchnoi just a few years ago in Las Vegas. I had gone canyoneering, hiking in the Grand Canyon, and took a first-round bye. I expected to be around board 40, but to my surprise, when I dragged myself in, I was on board one against Korchnoi. He had drawn in round one, and his contract said that no matter how he was doing, he was playing on board one. So, that's when I had to play Korchnoi. I didn't last very long.

AB: *You once mentioned your wife met Garry Kasparov. Do you mind sharing that story?*

VP: Well, she manages to make friends with everybody and talks to everybody, you know, and I guess that draws them

out because Kasparov does not have a good reputation in conversation. Yet, you know, while I was playing chess, she had engaged him in a conversation because she asked him if his application for Latvian citizenship had come through. He had left Russia and was looking to acquire a residence permit someplace else, in some other country. He said no, they had been dragging their feet, so he got Croatian residency and maybe citizenship. They went on from that, they had a long talk.

AB: *Many people ask, "How do you keep going? How is that possible? Is it some kind of genetic thing? What do you say to that? Your chess games are always long, lasting five or six hours. How do you manage it?*

VP: Well, basically, we are in this world for the long run. I prefer one job, one marriage partner, and so on, living in the same place. That's about the way I play chess. Now, I'm a little more scatterbrained than that, but generally speaking, yes, I would play very solid and lengthy games.

AB: *Speaking of your marriage partner, do you mind sharing how you met your wife?*

VP: Well, she worked at The Last Exit, and from time to time, when I was there, I knew her enough to say hello. Then one day in Kitsap County, she walked into my business looking for a job. She wasn't living with much money, and I took one look at her and said, "Oh! I know who you are, you're hired!" You could do that back then. This was in 1974. Shortly thereafter, I found out that if I was getting any kind of feedback from the boss or some kind of undermining, she was protecting me.

As I said, she's a religious person and has her own way of doing things. Particularly, there was one time when I was in the store with a security guy to put in cameras, and she showed up for work early and found the door locked. She knew I was in there, and the security guy said, "Go get rid of her, tell her to come back later." So I did that, and within the next five minutes, the telephone rang, and she said, "I know you're in the store and not by yourself. There's somebody else in the store with you. Tell me what's going on, or I'm going to call the police." The security guy said to let her in because she was doing the right thing. There were other incidents similar to that.

So basically, over time, although we were married to other people at the time, I knew who I could count on and rely on. When you're 18 or so, you don't have a record of what people are like, but later on in life, you do, and you know who you can count on. So eventually, I would have walked on hot coals for her.

AB: *Coming back to chess, a lot of young people nowadays depend on computer analysis. You're from a different generation when there was no Stockfish, no Komodo, or anything like that. What do you have to say to the younger generation that always depends on chess engines?*

VP: It's fine. You know that way they can get stronger faster, and they can probably pick up in six weeks what might have taken me six years to do, because I'm entirely self-taught.

AB: *So, you support that way of learning?*

VP: Just the way it is. Doesn't matter, that is the way it is. And so, you have to deal with things the way they are. Yes, the net result is that you can see that people don't leave pieces hanging, and they have some positional understanding. They are stronger than the average field would have been years ago. This is good because when I was in school, a teacher said that if you can get knights, bishops, and rooks to act in harmony, it is a transferable skill. It's like apples and oranges; if you can do that, you can use similar skills or a similar way of thinking in other fields of life.

AB: *Growing up did you have any favorite chess book that inspired you?*

VP: Not really. Basically, I'm self-taught, and I like to experiment, like I wonder where this goes. Say you're driving on a forest service road, and there's a fork in the road; you wonder where it goes. Sometimes, to your detriment, sometimes things don't work out that well, but you're satisfying your curiosity. That's what it's all about—curiosity. Computers and artificial intelligence can tell you what's already there, but they don't give you room for creativity.

AB: *Do you have any message for the younger generation who want to improve their chess or have a long chess career like you?*

VP: If you enjoy doing it, go ahead and do it. If you switch to something else later in life, enjoy doing that and do whatever is possible for you. Because, like I said, when I came to this country, there was no networking, there was no air traffic—I mean, it's a different world. You make do with what you've got the best you can.

AB: *How would you want your legacy to be remembered?*

VP: No reason to do that. The good that people do is often interred with their bones; the evil lives on after them. (laughs)

AB: *Before I end the interview, I wanted to ask you: What do you think of the current World Championship? Do you follow top-level chess?*

VP: I do, but there's too much of it because I always find the same names. There's a group of about ten or 20 people at the top, and they keep playing each other all the time. Well, you know, just think if it was like that in football—the 49ers and Chiefs played each other every weekend. After a while, it gets kind of... you can't follow it all because there's too much to follow. That's another problem with the computers and everything like that—there is too much information.

AB: *Uncle Vik, thank you for the interview. It's been really great. Before we end, do you have anything else to say, like any message or anything?*

VP: Well, keep your chin up, stay out of trouble, and be polite.

Viktors Pupols. Photo credit: Ani Barua.