

Terekhov, Andrey, 2020. *The Life and Games of Vasily Smyslov: Volume 1 The Early Years 1921-1948*. Milford: Russell Enterprises Inc.

Vasily Smyslov was world chess champion for but a single year, 1957 - 1958. Yet he was one of the strongest players for considerably longer. Finishing second to Botvinnik in the 1948 tournament held to determine a new world champion after the death of Alekhine in 1946, Smyslov was a candidate for the world championship on seven further occasions, 1950, 1953, 1956, 1959, 1965 and, remarkably, 1983 and 1985.

Andrey Terekhov has undertaken what can only be described as a labour of love in endeavouring to produce a comprehensive biography of Smyslov encompassing not only his games but his life. The present volume is the first of an as yet undetermined number, but at least three.

The basics of Smyslov's life are well known. Born in 1921 in Moscow he was a first category player by 1937. A combination of his chess talent and his appalling eyesight granted him exemption from the front during the war. Unfancied at the start of the 1948 tournament he went on to finish second which established him as a leading contender for the title.

He achieved the title in 1957 only to lose the rematch against Botvinnik in 1958. Despite many subsequent attempts to challenge for the title again, he never succeeded. Smyslov was a frequent tournament player and a mainstay of the all conquering Soviet team.

Yet, despite all this chess success, it was by no means certain that this would be his career. As a student, he had been an engineer. Later he took up music and was an accomplished singer. Indeed he only finally abandoned hope of a music career after failing an audition at the Bolshoi in 1950. Nevertheless, he continued to sing and would often entertain at the end of tournaments in the company of Mark Taimanov on piano. Taimanov was a less successful chess player but a more successful musician and recordings of his playing remain on sale today.

Terekhov claims that Smyslov never joined the Communist Party. I must say I entertain some doubt on that score given both his position in Soviet chess and his being allowed frequent travel abroad, but I can but trust that the author is accurate. Given the painstaking detail in this book, it would be surprising if he was guilty of such an error.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism did not go well for poor Smyslov. Shorn of the admiration and support of the Soviet State he fell on hard times and died in near poverty, of heart failure, in 2010 at the age of 89.

For those interested in Smyslov, what does this book offer? The simple answer is a great deal. Its 536 pages are contained within hard covers. This is clearly a book for keeping. There are many photographs contained within the text rather than collected together as 'plates' on glossy paper. Personally, I prefer this. Although the picture quality is necessarily reduced, it is better to see the picture as one reads rather than

have to refer to 'plate 20' and flick through to elsewhere in the book to see it. But others will, understandably, take a different view to mine.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. Each gives a narrative of Smyslov's life in particular periods followed by a collection of extremely well annotated games from that period. Then we get chapter 11, where Terekhov gives a brief history of his wife, Nadezhda Andreevna, and of their long marriage. Finally, we get a couple of appendices. One discusses Smyslov's system in the Grunfeld Defence and the other Smyslov's remarkable endgame prowess.

Should you buy this book? If, like me, you are interested in Smyslov or chess history then absolutely. There are some great stories and great games in these pages. I very much look forward to buying the second volume when it comes out. I managed to buy this volume for the very reasonable price of £14.72. However, Amazon are currently advertising the book at just over £23. At this price it is still excellent value.

Adam Spencer