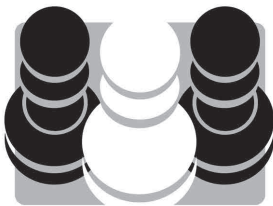


# Vladimir Kramnik: The Inside Story of a Chess Genius

By

Carsten Hensel



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# Prologue

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13th of October 2006, 19:10, Elista, Federal Russian Republic of Kalmykia: the deathly hush in the over-filled playing hall is shattered by an outcry. On move 44 of the decisive fourth tiebreak game, Topalov has blundered and left his rook en prise. Kramnik's posture changes to bolt upright. Miguel Illescas pinches my leg and whispers: "We've done it, that loses!" On move 45 Kramnik places his rook on b7. Check! Topalov stares for a moment at the chess board, shakes his head and resigns. Kramnik's fist leaps upwards in a sign of triumph, just as it did after his epic World Championship victories over Garry Kasparov and Peter Leko. The insane tension I am feeling is released and the otherwise so-restrained spectators turn the auditorium of Kalmykia's government building into a madhouse. Cheering, stamping and staccato applause go on for minutes.

In the Kramnik team we hug each other. I cannot stay in my seat any longer. Vladimir is standing somewhat bemused by the playing table, trying to clip his pen into the inside pocket of his jacket. I rush onto the stage, giving vent to the pressure built up within me in tears of joy, and cannot resist brandishing my fist in the direction of Topalov's team.

This match for the World Chess Championship ended a thirteen-year division within the chess world and was the most dramatic of all time. Aside from the 1972 match between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer, no World Championship had ever attracted such powerful interest from the media. This was caused not mainly by the exciting course of the contest, but by "Toiletgate" – nothing less than a scandal.

All this was more than ten years ago.

This book is first and foremost about the person and the chess player, Vladimir Kramnik. Like the squares on the chess board, the stories are grouped into 64 sections, linked to my personal experiences and other events within the chess world, seen from time to time within the context of contemporary history. Kramnik's years as World Champion from 2000 to 2007 are considered the most difficult and conflicted in the history of chess politics. I stood by his side during this time and was perhaps able to some extent to contribute to him remaining on the chess throne for seven years under adverse conditions.

Chess world champions are encircled by legend; they have an aura of myth in the public imagination. In sport this title is considered one of the most important. As heavyweight boxing champions are seen as the greatest fighters, and the 100-metre sprint champion the fastest humans, the chess World Champion is considered to be among the most intelligent people on the planet – and frequently correctly so! In its long and varied history, the royal game has far produced 16 Classical World Champions. All were famous among chess lovers and their playing style influenced their generations.

Much has been written about Vladimir Kramnik. What I can add is an authentic first-hand impression of this extraordinary man and the most important events in his great career. Nobody else was as close to the great matches of the 14th World Chess Champion over such a long period of time. Our friendship began back in the 1990s and stays strong. And in the intense period from 2002 to 2009, I was his professional advisor.

During specific phases of his career, certain circles have tried to portray Kramnik as a boring, self-centred pragmatist. Even Garry Kasparov, his predecessor on the chess throne, joined in this criticism for a while. But those presenting such an image of Kramnik have either no idea of who or what they are talking about, or simply wished to create this image out of self-interest.

Kramnik, a positionally active and very creative player, has played some of the most beautiful games in chess history. And the way he plays chess is how he conducts himself away from the board: sometimes chaotic, sometimes emotional, sometimes brilliant – but consistently authentic. Few, if any, have enriched the development of this magnificent game as much as Vladimir.

We are setting out on a journey through four decades of the life of the 14th World Chess Champion. On the way we will experience many emotional moments and come into contact with the dark side of the chess world.

In 1992 Garry Kasparov won the super-tournament “Dortmund Chess Days”, nowadays known as the Sparkassen Chess Meeting. On the floor below, in the public bar of the Westfalenhalle, 17-year old Vladimir Kramnik shared first in the accompanying Dortmund Open. He achieved this in great style, ahead of another 541 participants, including more than 100 international title holders. This success drew the attention of the chess media to the young Russian for the first time.

Garry Kasparov said: “The most talented of all the players here is Vladimir Kramnik. All the others are making moves, but Kramnik is playing chess!”

I had heard of Kramnik the year before, picked up in passing in conversation with the ex-world champion (1948-1963) Mikhail Botvinnik, but it was only at this moment I really paid attention. Vladimir and I got to know each other better and better during the 1990s. After the Dortmund tournament of 1992, Kramnik received invitations to

all the top events. He quickly climbed into the top 10 of the world ranking list, a place he would not relinquish until November 2014 (at the time of printing, October 2018, Kramnik is ranked 7th).

In 1993, Kramnik was invited to the top group in Dortmund, a tournament which he won for the first time in 1995 and would go on to win a further nine times in his “Dortmund living room”. His ten victories in such a high-level international competition represent a special record in the history of sport.

In the account which follows it is Vladimir Kramnik the man who is to be portrayed, while at the same time priority will be given to what happened during his time as World Chess Champion. It is the first biography to be published since he won the world championship title in a match in 2000 against Garry Kasparov.

Vladimir has contributed to this book quite considerably. My work was made easier by notes I had made during his great matches. Once years have passed, we tend to see things through a particular lens. For that reason, I have tried to present Kramnik’s and my views from as close as possible to what was happening at the time. I was helped in this by a dozen folders of material, notes in my weekly planners, as well as interviews and comments made by Kramnik at the time.

At the end of each chapter Vladimir Kramnik himself reviews the most important games played at these key moments in his career. These annotations are not the usual deep analysis of possible variations we see in magazines and tournament chess; rather they describe what the 14th World Champion was feeling at these peaks of his career.

At the end of the book there is a detailed historical record. This includes, amongst others, all Kramnik’s world championship games played between 2000 and 2008. There is also information about all previous world champions in the history of classical chess, based to a great extent on the opinions of Vladimir.

It would be a great satisfaction to Vladimir Kramnik and me if this book ignites in any reader of this book an interest in the most splendid of all games, chess. I hope you will read on and patiently study many wonderful games by the 14th World Chess Champion with a smile on your face.

*Carsten Hensel*

Dortmund, October 2018



Vladimir's style is linked to enjoying the game. He likes to play beautiful chess. For him beauty comes to life more in the depth of the process and less in some extraordinary event: "As a child I would have liked to become a painter and later I integrated this desire into my play. I like to be creative. In this way I can penetrate more deeply than usual into the subtleties of a position."

The public is another important factor for Kramnik. When hundreds of people stream into the playing hall and millions of chess fans follow his games on the internet, that is a great source of satisfaction. However, not all chess lovers can see all the nuances of the game. When we talk about depth and understanding, the analysis provided by a chess engine is often of little help. Kramnik does not find this so tragic: "The more people there are at a concert by a musician, the more intense the effect the performance will be on each individual. Whenever I am at a concert, I know that I can only reach a certain depth in my listening to the music. But feeling that perfection is to be found at a greater depth than my subjective experience has always fascinated me."

Vladimir Kramnik's favourite colour is blue, and he is particularly fond of desserts. He likes double espressos, from time to time a good glass of red wine, and also after particularly great efforts sometimes a small glass of single malt Scotch whisky. He can no longer tolerate much alcohol since in 2005 he was diagnosed with a rheumatic illness, which is chronic and demands almost total abstinence.

Kramnik is a lover of literature. His favourite works include *Siddharta* by Hermann Hesse, whose work he has discovered in recent years, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, and *Generation P* by Viktor Pelevin. He likes the movies directed by Stanley Kubrick and Miloš Forman, although in general he prefers reading. His favourite actors are Robert De Niro and Inna Churikova.

His musical interests are universal, though he is turning more and more to classical music. His favourite composer is Johann Sebastian Bach. Vladimir is good friends with several virtuosi, including Vadim Repin, about whom Yehudi Menuhin once said: "He is simply the best and most perfect violinist that I have ever had the privilege of listening to." In painting he feels an affinity to impressionism and loves the works of the Italian painter Amedeo Clemente Modigliani.

*Karpov's Best Games* was the chess book which had the greatest influence on him as a child. For one simple reason: in the Soviet Union it was for a long time the only chess book which was available to him. As for his favourite players, he names them in chronological order: Emanuel Lasker, Alexander Alekhine, Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov.

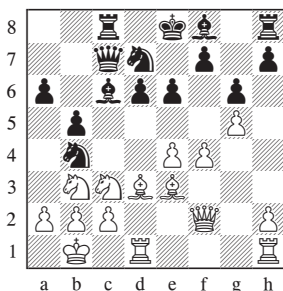
What Kramnik considers as the most important character trait in a person is integrity. Vladimir Kramnik is married to Marie-Laure Kramnik, née Germon. He got to know the former journalist at the major Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* during an interview in 2003. Marie-Laure and Vladimir married in 2007 in the Russian Orthodox church in Paris and are proud parents of two children: Daria and Vadim. The family lives in Geneva, Switzerland.

## Vladimir Kramnik – Veselin Topalov

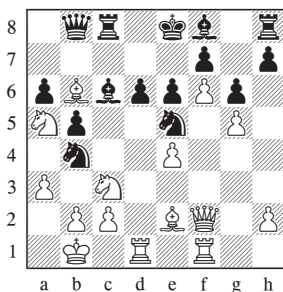
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Monaco (blindfold) 2003

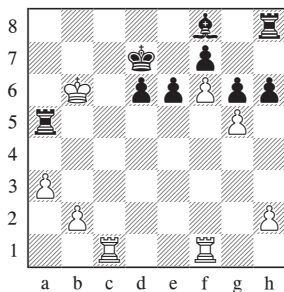
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘c6 5.♘c3 d6 6.♙e3 ♘f6 7.f4 a6 8.♚f3 ♚c7  
9.0–0–0 ♙d7 10.♘b3 ♝c8 11.♜b1 b5 12.♙d3 ♘b4 13.g4 ♙c6 14.g5 ♘d7 15.♚f2 g6



16.♝hf1 ♙g7 17.f5 ♘e5 18.♙b6 ♚d7 19.♙e2 ♚b7 20.♘a5 ♚b8 21.f6 ♙f8 22.a3



22...♘xc2 23.♜xc2 ♙xe4† 24.♜b3 ♙a8 25.♙a7 ♚c7 26.♚b6 ♚xb6 27.♙xb6  
h6 28.♘xb5! ♘d7 29.♙d4 ♙d5† 30.♜a4 axb5† 31.♙xb5† ♙c6 32.♙xe5! ♙xb5†  
33.♜xb5 ♝c5† 34.♜b6 ♝xe5 35.♝c1 ♝xa5

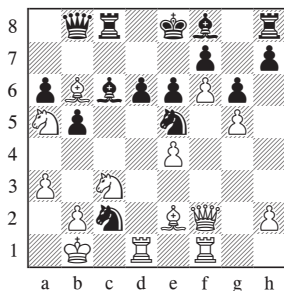


36. ♖c7†! ♕d8 37. ♜fc1 ♖c5 38. ♜1xc5 dxc5 39. ♕c6!! ♗d6 40. ♕xd6 e5 41. ♜a7 ♕c8  
42. ♜a8† ♕b7 43. ♜xh8 1–0

Vladimir Kramnik:

*“I very much like this game. The reader should know that we were playing blindfold and in rapid chess mode. Each player had only 25 minutes plus ten seconds increment per move for the entire game. That of course makes it much more difficult to calculate variations.*

*At that time Topalov played only the Sicilian against 1.e4 and was very successful with it. I had the initiative coming out of the opening, but in these sorts of positions it is easy to make bad decisions, not only in a blindfold game but also in classical chess. The first important moment was Topalov’s knight sacrifice 22... ♖xc2.*

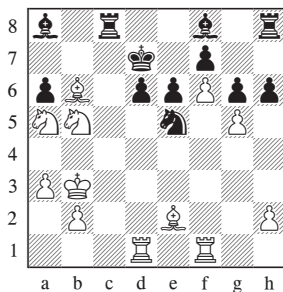


*After 23. ♕xc2 and 23... ♗xe4† my king was vulnerable. Objectively White should have been better, but in fact the position is not so simple.*

*Black had a strong knight on e5, which was controlling the centre. He was wanting to activate his rook on the h-file. There was no direct way for White, and Black had potentially dangerous counterplay. I exchanged the queens, after which he played ...b6 in order to activate his rook. If he had succeeded in doing so, the position would have been very unclear. So I took on b5, a decision which I had calculated seriously during the game – as far as was possible in the short time available and with the fact we were playing blindfold. In doing so, I returned the extra material, however in return I got the initiative. After that we played interesting and strong moves: play on both sides was high-class.*

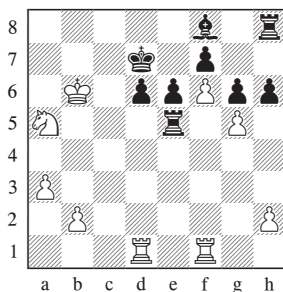
*Topalov began with the strong 28... ♕d7, after which the game became unbelievably fierce.*



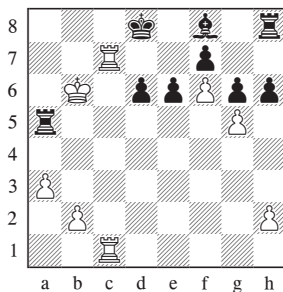


After 29. ♔d4 ♕d5† I had to flee with my king to a4, the best defence. Topalov played 31... ♕c6, a natural move, but would have done better to play 31... ♖c6. Okay, White would still retain an advantage, but Black would have had considerably better chances to hold the game. And now I began to penetrate into his camp with my king: a quite astonishing motif. I was not able to calculate everything, but I felt that it would work. We were still in the middlegame and it is very rare for such a thing to happen in this phase of the game.

My king pushed forward onto the seventh and eighth ranks and in that way supported the attack.

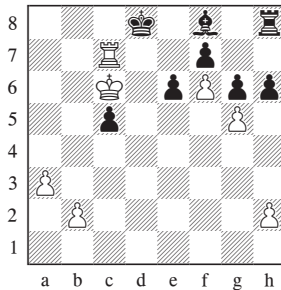


35. ♖c1 was a significant resource. Everything worked for White, simply springing from a single movement and with the advantage of a tempo. On move 36 it was very important not to recapture, but to play 36. ♖c7†. That was something I had to see in advance, which I did. After 37. ♖fc1 there were two nice motifs:



After 37...♖a8 I would have had 38.♔b7, which I like a lot. The king would have lured the rook into a trap; really outlandish and extraordinary business. But he played 37...♖c5, probably thinking that he could hold on to the piece.

But after 38.♖1xc5 dxc5 was played, the moment arrived when I really felt the beauty of it all and saw everything. My heart began to throb, to beat faster. It was so beautiful, so extraordinary that at first I could hardly believe it. I had only a little time on the clock, but it worked on account of the very accurate move 39.♕c6, with which I threatened mate in two.



It was madness, he was a piece up, my king was exposed, but there was nothing he could do against this threat.

It is always nice to win a game, however in this case the feeling was simply wonderful, as it is based on a study-like motif. When I later checked the game on the computer, I was surprised at how high a level we had both played. In rapid and blindfold chess it is often the case that one side bluffs. We had overlooked nothing, nor had we made any big blunders. And yet the outcome was like this. That shows how beautiful chess can be. From one moment everything flowed logically. If I had not had the resource of 35.♖c1, the pendulum would probably have swung in his favour. This inconspicuous move turned things around and made everything I had done before correct and good. At the end I had the feeling that I had created a symphony. Had there not been this finish, the whole picture would have remained incomplete and the symphony would have collapsed like a house of cards. That is the feeling one has on the completion of a masterpiece, and I was very happy.”

*1994: Bohemian and chaotic genius*



*2000: Tennis was part of the preparation before the Kasparov match*



*2006: Done it! The chess world is united at last and Kramnik is its champion*

