

Richard Shorman

Chess

TARJAN, SEIRAWAN INTERVIEWED IN RIGA

International grandmaster James Tarjan and world junior champion Yasser Seirawan were popular guests at the recently held interzonal tournament in Riga, Latvia, Tarjan, along with Edmar Mednis, represented the United States, while Seirawan acted as their second. The following interview, translated from the Russian ("Shakhmatny nezhzonalny", No. 6, 1979), was made a part of the tournament bulletings commemorating the event.

"I Am Happy To Visit Your Country Again."

First, some standard biographical information. International grandmaster James Tarjan is 27 years old. He was born in Pomona, California and learned to play chess at eight years of age by watching games between his father and brother. He currently lives in Berkeley, where he is a student of English literature at the University of California. Tarjan earned his international master title in 1974, the same year that he performed splendidly at the Chess Olympics in Nice, turning in the best result for a second reserve of 11 points out of 13 possible. In 1976 he became an international grandmaster.

Last year Tarjan took second place in the United States Championship. It was the success that opened the door for him to participate in the interzonal tournament.

Our correspondent asked James Tarjan to respond to some questions:

—How to you like it h re, James?

—Great! Two years ago I played in an international tournament in Odessa, and I am very happy to visit your country again. I like Riga, and I have only good things to say about how the tournament is being run.

—Have you ever played on a stage before?

—Yes, the very U.S. Championship in which I took second was held in a Los Angeles theater. I like to play on stage, the more so because I especially value a creative start in chess.

—In that case, it would be interesting to know whose creations impress you the most.

—Fischer, Spassky, Tal . . .

—And what kind of chess books do you like?

—Game collections of outstanding players. I am not an avid fan of opening books. I think there are too many of them . . .

—Who is your second?

—World Junior Champion Yasser Seirawan. As a matter of fact, he is helping not only me, but Mednis, too. We are unable to afford two seconds because of the cost.

—And who is financing your trip?

—Mainly a private organization called the "American Chess Foundation". The foundation exists because a number of wealthy Americans bequeath specific sums for the support of chess players. These funds are kept in a bank, and the percentage earned on the principal constitutes the actual chess fund.

—Obviously, the U.S. Chess Federation also helps?

—Not at all! This is one of the reasons that last year we formed the Professional Chess Association, a union of chess masters independent of the Federation. In fact, I am the vice-president of this organization and Jack Peters is its president. Many U.S. chess professionals are dissatisfied with the activities of the national federation, and we want to organize and publicize tournaments ourselves — in short, to get involved with the administrative side of chess. So far, our organization is young and still has only a few members, so it is still too early to talk about any real progress.

—I wish you success!

"This Is a First-Class Tournament!"

—Yasser, first a standard question. This is your first visit to Riga. What are your impressions?

—Riga is a beautiful city! I often travel abroad and I enjoy seeing unfamiliar places through the eyes of a tourist.

—Many in Riga are unfamiliar with your name. Please tell us something about yourself.

—I was born on March 24, 1960, the same day as Smyslov (laughs), in Damascus, Syria. When I was four, my family went to England, and from the age of six I have lived in the United States in Seattle, Washington. That is where I learned to play chess, when I was 12 and seven months old. A month later and I was already testing my strength in a tournament. I played a lot and did well, besides. I like this very much and so I became a professional chess player.

—Where do you rank among American chess players?

—Third, I believe, after Kavalek and Browne. My rating is 2540.

—Do you work with a chess coach?

—No, I prefer to work alone, that is when I work at all. I am generally not very studious, and I love to play much more than to read a book. And as far as a coach is concerned, I am a coach . . . a swimming coach (chuckles). I teach a small group of girl swimmers at Washington University. But, of course, this is more like pleasure than work for me. I like all sports a lot, especially basketball.

—Then why have you become so seriously involved with chess for so long?

—You see, what I like about chess is that it is an individual sport, and that, unlike team sports, the result depends only upon your own efforts.

—And who are your favorite chess players?

—I have a lot of them! I like the way Paul Keres played very much. I really admire Tigran Petrosian . . . In fact, I was able to play a few speed games (I love speed chess!) with Petrosian at Lone Pine. Then U.S. champ Walter Browne gave three to one odds that I would lose. I won — that was an incredible game! Before the next game, Browne said, "50-50". Again, I won! Then Browne bet three to one on me and, of course, I lost!

—How did you become a participant and then the winner of the world junior championship?

—I qualified by winning the U.S. Junior Championship. At the beginning, I did lose two games, but in the end everything worked out all right. In the world championship, the Soviet player, Yusupov, was heavily favored, but his game was off, while, on the contrary, I was getting all the breaks . . .

Have you played in the U.S. Championship?

—No. There are various reasons. The strongest players only compete during interzonal selection years. The other years have low prizes and poor organization that keeps the good players from taking part in these championships, so it is not very interesting to play in them. The Lone Pine open tournaments, conducted by Louis Statham and master Isaac Kashdan, are another matter. There the prizes are good and the playing conditions excellent. I played at Lone Pine this year, and among my nine opponents were eight grandmasters. I scored 5½ points, and half-point above the grandmaster norm, beating Larsen and Miles on the way!

—Well done. But why do not the organizers of that tournament also conduct the national championship?

—They do not want to. A round-robin tournament like the championship only accommodates a few top players, whereas at Lone Pine young players can acquire experience against strong grandmasters.

—That's understandable. Since we are talking about organization, what do you have to say about the Riga interzonal?

—That it is a first-class tournament! I have never seen better playing conditions. Chess does not receive anywhere near this much respect in the U.S. I am not sure that our newspapers — non-chess newspapers, naturally — would cover this tournament even if Tarjan were suddenly to take first place . . . Here, on the other hand, I was met by a delegation at the airport that made me feel like an important person . . .

—Is this your first experience in the role of second?

—Yes, until now I have only played. Before the interzonal I did spend a few months visiting Jim — he's my friend — but we actually spent more time getting tanned than studying chess.

—Imagine for a minute that you came here not as a second, but as a player in the tournament. How do you think you would do?

—Just to be able to play in this tournament would be an honor, and it would not matter whether I did well or not!