

# Mihail Marin Interview



On the first of March Mihail Marin, a grandmaster from Romania, won the ChessCafe.com Book of the Year award by popular vote ahead of Jonathan Rowson's *Chess for Zebras* and Jennifer Shahade's *Chess Bitch*. We immediately caught up with the happy author to hear about his emotions upon receiving this great honour, as well as to learn something about the man behind the book.

*First Mihail, allow me to congratulate you on winning ChessCafe Book of the Year for **Learn from the Legends** - Chess Champions at their Best. Did you expect to be nominated, let alone win this honour?*

Getting nominated for such a contest is a great honour, of course. Although I had twice had this pleasant experience before (at the ChessCafe in 2003 with my first book *Secrets of Chess Defence* and last year from the BCF with "The Legends") I was quite happy when a friend of mine told me two weeks ago that I had just qualified for a final again. True, the thrill was not the same as the first time and actually I got used to being one of the runners-up. I remember that on the day when the final result for BOTY 2003 was to be announced, the first thing I did in the morning (apart from waking up) was to switch on the computer and check the situation. This year, on March 1st, I had just started my usual working day when I suddenly remembered the whole issue. I connected to ChessCafe.com with such thoughts as "Let's see who I should congratulate on the win this time!" Actually, if we think about it, there should not be such a big difference between being one of the top three (or four or whatever) but the human mind is

educated very much in the spirit of "The winner takes it all!" And just as I had felt a bit of disappointment on the previous occasions, I was very happy to learn that "The Legends" have won this year's contest. I would like to congratulate Jennifer and Jonathan and hope they obtain "full success" on a further occasion. To put it briefly, the answer to your two questions is 1-maybe and 2-no.

*Can you, in short, describe the idea of **Learn from the Legends**? Where did the idea of *Learn from the Legends* come from?*

First of all, let me say that I shall try not to repeat aspects I have written about in the foreword to the book. Most of the chapters were initially written in the form of independent articles, long before I even thought about writing books at all. The articles had several purposes: to serve as diploma works at the Trainers' School in Romania or to be published in the Romanian National Chess Magazine or in the Swedish *Schacknytt*. In the introduction to each chapter I have generally explained the way I first got in contact with its central theme, a couple of decades ago. I would add now that the reasons that reactivated my interest (maybe enthusiasm is a better description) and made me determined to write my thoughts down were often separate incidents, and did not form a well-established plan. For instance, I remember that I spent a couple of hours analysing the ending Fischer-Taimanov with my wife, Luiza, sitting on a terrace of the Herastrau Park in Bucharest. We discovered so many hidden nuances compared to Balashov's excellent comments that I decided to investigate the subject further. My close

friendship with the editors from the aforementioned magazines (Mihai Panait and Ari Ziegler) induced me to express myself freely, without any inhibitions. There are so many things that you sometimes refrain from writing, just because you are afraid that the editor will cut them down...

After I had published a bunch of these articles already, I started considering the possibility of putting them together into a book. I contacted a big publishing house but they rejected the idea because it would not be appealing to the public. I had more or less abandoned the whole plan when all of a sudden the editors of the newly created QCB suggested that I develop this project. I was quite happy, of course, but I did not suspect yet how much more work was to be done still. My editor was Jacob Aagaard. I have no words to express my gratitude to him. He pushed me hard not only to transform the articles into chapters that fit well together but gave me lots of essential advice of a more general nature. I still keep in a safe place the printouts of the initial form of the articles, filled on their back with Jacob's handwritten notes. They are sort of school notes or, if you wish, a handbook for chess writers.

*You are, I am sorry to say, no longer a very young man, especially not in the Chess World where 12 year-olds are making GM-norms (it seems) almost daily. Are you seeing yourself move more into writing than playing, and maybe teaching chess as well?*

This is a complex question. In fact it contains two relatively independent aspects, which I shall try to answer separately. My pleasure of playing chess has not diminished over the years, but some 10 years ago I have started developing a new hobby: chess writing. It all started rather spontaneously. While my opponents were thinking over the next move, I frequently surprised myself by mentally composing articles based on the events from the current game. Sometimes this helped me in the way that I became less tense, but quite often this led to my concentration

diminishing. To a certain extent, this is the nature of the main problem. Time and human resources are so awfully limited that I haven't managed yet to entirely adapt myself to the dual character of my professional activity. I achieve the best results (in both fields!) when I manage to induce in myself the psychological approach of an amateur: the pure pleasure of practising my hobbies without any concrete purpose. However, it can also happen that I work on a book longing for the next tournament to come or, on the contrary, to ruin a well started tournament just because I bear in mind so many things to write. Taimanov wrote that whenever he plays chess he relaxes from playing the piano and vice versa, adding that this allowed him to have a never-ending vacation. He must have had a very happy life. This is the state of mind I would dream of.

Now we come to the problem of my age. While there are people around who can successfully compete with youngsters despite approaching their 75th



birthday, I feel that I am very young still. I believe that I have not completed my evolution as a chess player yet and although for physical reasons I sometimes have disappointing results, I still play 2-3 tournaments per year that I can be satisfied about. Time might eventually force me to move into the direction mentioned, but I have no intention to cooperate in any way.

The thrill given by a tournament win or a well-played game cannot be compared with anything else. Playing chess keeps me mentally fit, just as bike riding maintains the fluidity of my blood. However, now I could not imagine my life without writing, either.

*A lot of people mention you as the chess writer of the moment, something that has now been confirmed with the public's vote of confidence. But which books have influenced you, both of recent books and from the past? Who are the giants on whose shoulders you are standing?*



The good part of chess writing compared to playing is that you do not have this novice feeling of competition. The only thing you have to fight against is your own weaknesses. There are two main things: to be consequent in your search for the truth (to the extent that such a notion exists) and to have sufficient concentration to express your thoughts and feelings as clearly and (even more importantly) faithfully as possible. While the first part is something players are more or less used to, the second part is more difficult. Our physical limits tend to distort our thoughts and feelings during the process of expressing them.

Now, let us return to the absence of competition. I was very pleased, of course, by all the favourable reviews I received, but I have not tried to build to myself an image of “the writer of the moment”. This is something very relative, it is not like being a World Champion or a National Champion, where you simply have to accumulate the highest number of points in a certain competition. I took the generally positive opinion of critics just as proof that I was not spending my time in vain when writing. It also helped me to express myself more freely in the next writings. I have built up my chess culture mainly on the basis of Soviet chess books. There are quite a number of

giants in Soviet chess literature that I am obliged to. Some of the elements that influenced me most were Karpov’s concision, Tal’s joy for chess and life in general, Botvinnik’s methodical thinking.

*You are from Romania. In the West this country is often seen as the one with the most tragic history in Eastern Europe during the communist reign. Was it a difficult place to grow up in? And how did growing up in a communist East European country influence your choice of becoming a chess professional?*

I was born the same year that Ceausescu came to power and graduated from the Polytechnic Institute just months before his fall from the throne. My whole moral and intellectual education took part during one of the worse periods of Romania’s whole history. Day by day life is not much fun under permanent terror. You would have a nice time for 5-10 minutes by telling or listening to a political joke and then live with the fear that “somebody” has heard you for a whole week and that you would end up in a police section. I was a student still when I started being regarded as a future top Romanian player. One day we (I lived with my parents) received a visit from a very sympathetic guy,

who declared himself a big fan of mine, but whom I had never seen before and I was not to meet ever again. I knew that “they” used to keep top players under strict observation, because these players were supposed to travel abroad. The visit did not last too long and I cannot know for sure whether the man had any hidden purposes, but I remember that we spent a couple of hours searching for microphones that he might have eventually dropped during his visit. We did not find anything suspicious, but the episode is relevant for the rather stressed state of mind of most Romanians. During the latest years, we had only 2-3 hours of TV transmission daily; half of it was dedicated to Ceausescu, of course. It is not hard to imagine that such a thing degenerated into a national obsession. You can understand that playing chess was a most welcome escape to a better (though imaginary) world.

There was no place for Ceausescu on the small board with 64 squares. The paradox is that the cruel communist system strongly sustained sporting and cultural activities, most probably for advertising purposes. Topclassmusiciansand gymnasts spread the name of Romania all over the world. Under these circumstances, being a strong chess player was a warranty for a relatively good life. It is not easy for

me to admit it, but as a chess player I indirectly owe quite a lot to the Ceausescu regime. I was lucky that the Wall was broken down just when I started making my first steps into maturity. I more or less understood the right value of freedom and could develop further as a person without any constrictions.

*If the communists were beneficial for chess, one could expect that chess would decline in Romania with the fall of the communists, but that is not so obviously so. Romania has many strong players, both male and female, including the current European Champion, your friend Nisipeanu. What is the real state of the Romanian Chess scene these years?*

When I heard the news about the first sparks of the revolution (it all started on the 16th-17th of December 1989, in Timisoara, quite far from Bucharest) among the contradictory thoughts that crossed my mind (most of them of hope for a change to the better) there was also a slightly alarming one: What will happen with chess life now? For a while, my fears seemed not to be justified. Chess tradition in Romania was just too strong and for about 10-12 more years there was a flourishing of our favourite sport. Strong clubs gave even better financial conditions to their players than before the revolution, but somewhere deep in my soul I knew that this would not last forever. Romania is supposed to join the European Union soon, which means among others that the whole economy should be re-oriented towards maximum efficiency. Chess is hardly an efficient activity, which explains the increasing



problems faced by strong chess clubs to find funds. The extreme case is that of RATB (the club of the public transport company from Bucharest) which was dissolved last year, in spite of having won about half of the post-revolutionary championships and being the club with the longest tradition in Romania (players like Gheorghiu, Nisipeanu, Istratescu, Corina Peptan were members throughout the years.

I had played for RATB no fewer than 25 years altogether). Fortunately, we recently had a positive change in the Federation. I have hopes that the new president and his team will manage to adapt chess activity to the new requirements of the society.

*As you probably already know this is not the first time you are to be found in an award winning chess book. I open last year's winner of Book of the Year at both ChessCafe.com and BCF, the Golden Globe and Oscar if you like, **My Life, Games and Compositions** by Pal Benko and Jeremy Silman, and find a picture of Benko, the Polgar family and a very young and slim Mihail Marin on one of the first pages. I imagine that this picture from Budapest*

*is taken in connection with a training session. Can you tell us about your relationship with the Polgar family?*

I was amused to see that photo in Benko's book. Comparing it with what I see in the mirror now, it seems that several ages have passed since then. It looks like the perfect photo I would include in an autobiographical book myself, given the number of celebrities surrounding me.

*Finally, there is of course no reason for resting on your laurels. You have won a Book of the Year award, but I assume that this is not the last chess fans will hear from Mihail Marin. What does the immediate future hold for you as a chess writer?*

I am currently working on my first opening book, which will be published soon by QCB. It is about fighting the open games as Black. Although I am supposed to make all the variations playable for Black (and I will definitely do that) sometimes I feel like turning the tables and taking White's side when it comes to such fascinating lines as the Evans Gambit or the Max Lange Attack. It is incredible what richness of ideas you can find in the games of the old masters. I have several other plans for new books and hope that I shall have the time and the strength to put them in practice. Openings, history, strategy, although when I write I cannot really separate these domains from each other.

