

Interview with Alik Gershon and Igor Nor

(Authors of English Federation Book of the year San Luis 2005.)

San Luis 2005 has been said to set new publishing standards by critics and seen as a logical continuation of a long tradition of tournament books, positioning itself in a small group of great titles such as St Petersburg 1909 (Lasker), New York 1924, New York 1927 (both Alekhine) and Zurich 1953 (Bronstein). Some have even gone as far as to call it better than Zurich 1953 or the best chess book seen.

After such a response from the critics it was not a surprise that the book unanimously won highest honour in chess publishing, the English Chess Federations book of the year. But as we shall learn below, the authors in no way thought the deal was in the bag.

San Luis 2005 is clearly a labour of love, but also a monster in terms of the effort put into it. What brought about this book? From where did the project arise?

Igor Nor: The most accurate way to put it would be: "it came from nowhere". It was a very unusual day when two old friends had, quite unexpectedly, the same positive mood. One of them offered to do a lot of analysis and the other, unlike on many other occasions when the same idea came from the same guy, boldly calling himself "trainer", didn't refuse...

Alik Gershon: Yeah, back then I was running a (Hebrew) chess website, and the idea of being the first ever to conduct a unique, real time analysis of a major event in Hebrew looked charming. The problem was that this spontaneous-patriotic plan, as some of Igor's ideas, had some tactical difficulties. To begin with, there were only a couple of days left before the beginning of the tournament and we hadn't even discussed the format of how it should look, not to mention the content itself. Fortunately, we both have quite an exhaustive in commenting chess, not to mention of working together. So those problems were successfully solved, mostly by way of ignoring them, and getting some sleep hours, that would surely be missed for the period to come.

Igor Nor: At some point, after a few rounds, we discovered an interesting phenomenon: people liked what we did. It couldn't be a complete surprise, but the proportions were unexpected.

Alik Gershon: Speaking ahead, this strange feeling of people appreciating our work much more than in our most optimistic prognoses become the normal condition. But at the time we were happy to see thousands of visitors on the website and printouts of the analysis in most unexpected places (some chess clubs, for instance), various forums discussions on the subject etc. In fact it was very exciting to see chess players sitting with the printouts and checking every sick idea we had during night analysis (the games, as you might recall, were played at night in Europe). Already during the tournament we started hearing suggestions to write a book, because "this is hot stuff"....

Igor Nor: Then after the tournament some very good friends of ours said very strictly that either we should make a book or someone else will, with our analysis. We didn't really know what the laws state here and by no means wanted to find out. So immediately after the end of the championship we somehow found ourselves in the middle of making our first book. This book could resemble the greatest games of Anatoly Karpov, where he would simply be solving problems as they were coming, but from outside it might look like there was this deep plan...

Alik Gershon:like some of my more fortunate chess games... Of course, as a part of the "plan", our old friend GM Arthur Kogan called me and asked a very strange question: "why don't you make the book in English?" Since we couldn't answer this one as well, we used the fact that he knew Jacob Aagaard from the Quality Chess, a company we had heard a lot about to ask him the same question.

Igor Nor: And Jacob was so enthusiastic...

Alik Gershon: Well... he agreed to see some of our analysis, but at the same time he did his best not to give us extra hopes, to say the least. This might be an appropriate moment to mention that the team of Quality Chess did not only help us a lot during the writing, but also were very straightforward in all aspects, including the economical one. Sadly enough, this is a kind of rarity, but one we would be happy to meet as much as possible.

Igor Nor: Absolutely. But meanwhile we were waiting for their decision and the fact it didn't come immediately could only mean something good. As we waited, I was trying to convince Alik and myself that the book was almost ready and we only need to translate it to English. In fact, at that time it looked as the most problematic "remaining thing".

Alik Gershon: Yes, if my memory serves me right, we also told QCB that the book was "over 80% finished". Looking back, translating was the least difficult thing. The point is that when I have completely adopted to the free style of life in Israel, my friend is, unfortunately, one of the successors of the old Russian chess-school. Meaning, there has always been only one reason for which the analysis could be paused and it is complete inability of the participants to continue. And this pause exists only in order to continue on the next day, and so on, until the mission is complete. So when we got a positive answer from Jacob, for me it felt like going to chess-prison for a while.

Igor Nor: Well, Alik exaggerates, of course. Indeed, he was never the biggest fan of hard work (in my opinion, this is one of the reason he wasn't close to being one of the participant of this tournament), but still we made a lot of analysis during the 10 years we have know each other, so there was nothing new for us.

How was it to write a book together? What were the advantages and what were the disadvantages?

Alik Gershon: As Igor said, it wasn't so new for us. He brought his knowledge, and the guy read a book or two in his life (in fact, he is reading everything he can get, including all possible websites. Spooky, really.). I tried to concentrate more on the struggling parts of the games and the endgames.

So for me the main disadvantage was that we had too many debates that made me work real hard to be able to prove my opinion.

Igor Nor: For me it was very positive. Alik's rating is lower than it should be and his help in many cases was very useful. Of course, our characters fits together just great - when one likes white, the other likes black and those symposia's could be changed every move.

Alik Gershon: Yeah, for a few months we've become like a tired couple, arguing on every occasion they have. In a good sense, of course ☺. Paradoxically, the general approach to the book was clear. Igor has a lot of tournament books...

Igor Nor: Including some English readers would never believe exist... For instance, in most of the years each Interzonal tournament had his own book (Brasilia and Leningrad 73, Riga and Rio de Janeiro 1979 and so on) and it couldn't be forgotten how interesting they were to read.

Alik Gershon: So we just tried to adopt the best things from all books we saw, and add our special touch with sugar on top.

Which games would you single out as the most important in the tournament, and what were the deciding moments?

Igor Nor: From the chess point of view I remember well the game Topalov-Anand from the second round. Strictly speaking, no one understood it. From the point the theory finished until the end, it looked like all the commentators were walking in the dark, mostly trying to guess what was going on. The temptation to adopt this approach was big (no one will even try to refute it), but we decided to go very slowly, move after move and discover the ideas behind each and every move.

Other games that were absolutely disastrous for analysing were those of Alexander Morozevich. He usually plays so technically, but complex and unforcing chess. To work out what is going on is always difficult. Morozevich-Polgar was a game it took a lot of time to make sense of.

Alik Gershon: I personally can't forget the very first tournament game, when at some point we have found that his majesty Kasparov, probably the greatest genius of our game (and analysis!) made some mistakes, which we found after a long way.

Also Svidler-Kasimdzhanov is a memorable one - it alone could probably make a small book, but all in all, every single game was something special, in general, and to us, and I think this is what really makes for the book - there is no "garbage time".

You are both from Israel and speak Russian. How was the experience of writing in English? One could imagine that it did not come naturally? Also, to what extent did Quality Chess' team influence the process?

Igor Nor: Alik is generally better in languages, except the Russian. The gap between us in English is pretty substantial, so he sometimes had to translate me to a better English. But it wasn't a problem for him - he knows the languages I know, so usually it wasn't difficult for him to understand my intentions.

Alik Gershon: Yes, and after this translation, the Quality chess guys translated it again from my good English to something, lets say, more traditional, something other people would understand as well ☺. And it was done quite effectively – after we saw the “fixed” version, we couldn’t believe that it wasn’t us using those words... QCB managed to relay it all as genuinely as possible. We think that the editing was very impressive.

Igor Nor: Completely agree. The interesting fact is that at the beginning, when we got the first set of “correctness’s” from Jacob Aagaard, we were amazed how many ideas he got. But most of them were chess related, so we even thought for a moment that the language was ok. Then John Shaw got to work and the result is twofold: the book became a success and John hates us now. But it is important to mention that the book we got so many complements for is a common work of many people, not only the authors.

San Luis 2005 has been compared by many to Zurich 1953 and is according to a former British Champion the best chess book he has ever seen. What do you think about this reception and to what extend did you expect it?

Alik Gershon: Well, “better than Bronstein” is too much. I think this is the book we both like the most and we strongly believe those comparisons are not in place – Bronstein of those days was one of the best players in the world and this probably puts an end to this discussion. But, of course, having such an amazing example of a tournament book could not help but influence our writing. And to me, the very fact people speak of these two books in the same breath is already a fantastic achievement for us.

Igor Nor: Well, for me Bronstein’s book was the first book I read, I think I can retell entire chapters in exact words. Again, we took all the best from other books, and some of our ideas and used all the modern utilities to show the tournament from its best side. There was not even one publication about the tournament we weren’t familiar with... It would have taken an even bigger effort to write a bad book than it did to write a good one.

More interesting is the expectation about this book. While trying your best book, even having a huge experience of reading, you can never know what, in fact, will be the reaction. Many times we asked ourselves isn’t it too deep or are there too many explanations? (I remember a very tired Alik saying with his last leftovers of politeness: “who do you think will read such a deep analysis?”)...

Alik Gershon: And at the end a lot of them were left out of the book. So I was right...

Igor Nor: Only partially: it is easier to remove things when you have found the truth than the opposite... Anyway, we are not so young anymore and it was clear we are not the first to think how to make the book the most interesting for the readers. So there is a good chance we also will not be the first to fail to do so. Thus at some point we just decide to adopt the old saying of the great Freddie Mercury “Talent will out, my dears”. For us it meant that if we will be good enough to make ourselves happy about this book, there will hopefully be other people who will not be able to ignore such a serious effort.

Alik Gershon: And you can take our word for it, that to make us happy, especially one of us, is such a difficult task, that the Freddie assumption had to work in this case.

We worked a lot to bring this book to a condition we could both agree was "OK", but then the Quality chess guys got into the picture and made us work even more. After all this, we were just too tired to think the book could fail.

This is your first chess book. With the reception it has received it is natural to ask if you are wanting to go on further adventures in the world of chess writing, or if you have had enough.

Igor Nor: Further...

Alik Gershon: Enough...

Igor Nor: Well, we are not completely agreed here and need to think...

Alik Gershon: In fact at this moment we have interesting ideas, but I still need to be convinced that working on those projects is not going to ruin our personal lives☺.

Let us go back a bit. You speak about old tournament books and about taking what is best from these for San Luis 2005. Why do you think that tournament books went out of fashion, and do you think that the success of San Luis 2005 marks the beginning of a revival? (Already we have seen Topalov and his team write about the Elista match and Bareev write about Kramnik's matches.)

Alik Gershon: In Russian those books never stopped. At some point in the 90s they almost hadn't published any at all, but when they survived the crisis the book returned. Even Kasparov-Kramnik match got a book by GM Sergey Shipov. And probably another reason is that in those years Kasparov dominated so mightily that most of the matches were irrelevant from the sporting point of view.

Igor Nor: In my opinion, the right question is why those books didn't succeed. The immodest answer is that no one wanted to work hard enough to make his book a qualitative one. It seems that there are too many authors that are convinced that it is enough they are writing something to attract people. We didn't have this mania before this success and we don't have it now.

At the same time I must admit that in my opinion the tournament books are to be rated above all other chess books. My first trainer always told me not to copy any opening top players use unless they do it in the most important events.

The reason is: only in those events will the best players show their secrets. If Kasparov game after game avoids the Marshal, he has a reason and the other players will know it too. Hence this opening is worth playing. If it was dodgy Kasparov would show the problematic line.

Alik Gershon: Take San Luis for example, where some positions proved themselves as success stories, and some will probably not be played anymore on the high level (like in Kasimdzhanov-Anand, Svidler-Topalov and so on...). But what is most important for me is the great tension in those tournaments. Not just "another" Berlin in yet another round robin. This is money time, and that brings some interesting, previously hidden qualities out of the players.

Let us try to jump forward a bit. The tournament in San Luis 2005 was meant to be the tournament that healed the chess world, but it didn't. Then the match in Elista was supposed to do the same, but when Kramnik won it was suddenly Topalov who was left out of the Mexico World Championship. Now we will have three matches to decide the ultimate World Champion once again. What is your opinion on the current state of affairs in the chess world?

Alik Gershon: At this moment there is a clear world champion and it is Anand. Everybody, including Kramnik, agree with it, and this situation would most likely not have happened without the San Luis tournament. Hopefully, after the current cycle there will finally be order.

Igor Nor: I might surprise some, but I really think that this intermediate temporary cycle is the best we can have. Unlike some respectable gentlemen (Mark Dvoretsky, for example), I don't believe in all those knock-outs and I think chess needs an undisputed king. So the match at the end looks as the most appropriate way to avoid an accidental champion. Same time, Round-Robin looks like the best way to find a good candidate. Moreover, it could be a good idea to allow the champion to participate in the candidates tournament - so he will be able to prevent a match if he wins. The same happened this time, but by mistake...

Alik Gershon: Nigel Short will probably say here that anything good FIDE is able to do is by mistake (of course, he will say it in a more fancy way ☺). Personally, I don't think there is one perfect system, neither for chess fans, nor for the players as a whole. The bottom line, it's all down to the participants. Some feel more comfortable with one system, some with the other - it will always be this way.

I suspect nobody could claim the KK matches, starting with their second one, to be boring, even though they weren't played with fast time controls, and even with adjournments (and none of them could be knocked out after two games), but then you have their first match, and Brisaggo...

All in all, what the system has to take care of is to allow the most appropriate candidates at least to have a chance to play against the champion, and to allow for that champion, coming out of this system to feel legitimate

Igor Nor: And this was not the situation a few years ago while Kasparov was still playing...

The three judges in the English Chess Federations Book of the Year committee had the following to say about San Luis 2005:

Tournament books have been an integral and important part of chess literature. They show both how chess was played and how it could be played. Three classics spring to mind: New York 1924 by Alekhine, Moscow -Leningrad 1942 by Botvinnik and Zurich 1953 by Bronstein. The latter is regarded by many as the best chess book ever written. However in the last two decades tournament books have become rare events, no doubt due to the work involved in this computer age.

San Luis 2005, an exceptional tournament which saw Topalov crowned as FIDE World Champion, deserved a permanent record. The two authors have put in a tremendous effort, seeking to find a correct analytical evaluation of every game. But there is much more to the book than that: forewords by Veselin Topalov and Nigel Short, the latter being sharply observant as always, a preface by Mihail Marin and various end papers which both salute Topalov's victory and vigorously debunk conspiracy theories.

San Luis would probably have won Book of the Year 2007 on the strength of the above alone, but it is greatly enhanced by the production values. The numerous photographs both in and out of the tournament hall are exceptional and give the reader a real insight into the tournament environment.

All in all, a splendid book which matches its great predecessors in analytical content but far exceeds them in presentation and layout. This is an outstanding book in every way.

San Luis 2005 is for sale in Europe for 29.99 euro, in the UK for 19.99 pounds and in the US for 39.95 dollars at most outlets. It is also available at www.qualitychess.co.uk

An excerpt of **San Luis 2005** (321 kb) can be found at this link:

<http://www.qualitychessbooks.com/uploadimages/39492.3864495371SanLuis2editionpage41-51.pdf>