

Checkmate!
The Love Story
of Mikhail Tal and Sally Landau

Sally Landau

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Author: Sally Landau

Translated from the Russian by Ilan Rubin

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov (www.elkov.ru)

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Front cover: Sally and Misha the day they announced their engagement

Back cover: Sally and her two husbands, Joe and Misha, Brussels, 1986

Photos provided by the Tal family

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FOREWORD

*Do you want to know how Tal wins?
It's very simple: he places the pieces in the center
and then sacrifices them somewhere*

David Bronstein¹

It is not the purpose of my memoir to recreate the image of Mikhail Tal in its entirety. Nor do I portray him with a saintly halo or as pure and innocent. That is impossible, not least because he was so unusual and ultimately indecipherable.

I am sure that every person who knew him has his own Misha, and that each protects his Misha from denigration by others who think their own opinion to be the ultimate truth. For Gelya, who was his faithful wife and devoted companion during the last 20 years of his life, there is only *her* Misha. For their daughter Zhannochka there is but *her* Misha, *her* father. For Misha's friends, including Alik Bakh, Zhenya Bebhuk, Ratko Knezevic and many others, there exists only their Misha.

For me, Misha will always remain *mine*. My first husband, my first amazing friend, the father of our son Gera, who bears his magic surname *Tal*. This is a memoir of my relations with Misha, encompassing our extraordinary but challenging life together and continuing inexplicably even today. A memoir of our relations at first intimate, then as a family, tender and yet contradictory. Bright moments in our life and sad moments, too. Relations constantly colored by the rainbow of Mikhail Tal's deep, complex, candid yet mysterious personality.

¹ Alexander Koblencs: *Along the Roads of Chess Battles* ("Dorogami shakhmatnikh srazhenii") p. 59 (1963)

This is *my* memoir and this is *Gera's* memoir.

Actually, I am not a writer and would never have written this memoir were it not for one reason: Misha asked me to write it. He did so the very last time we met, in Paris in 1991. He asked me to write about how much he loved me, and would always love me, after he died.

As a result, I had a burning desire to write down on paper my kaleidoscope of memories permeated by my feminine emotions, as well as Gera's memories as a son, so that they may be read by anybody whether or not they know how to play chess.

Sally Landau, Antwerp, 1998

CHAPTER 1

Sally (Saska, Ginger, Sally Landau, Mother of Gera Tal)

Recently I have been increasingly drawn to the conclusion that a person's entire life is just a fleeting moment that somebody has artificially drawn out over a number of years – longer for some than for others – filled with concrete episodes that remain in the “warehouse” of our memory. And we are the keepers of these warehouses. Some warehousemen keep the information in order: “catalogues” of random or planned events, images of people whom you encountered in your life, their portraits, characters, habits, thoughts, expressions, actions. Their names kept in strict alphabetical order. With perfectly recorded chronology. In other words, you have a powerful computer that prints the required text at your command.

But other warehousemen are in charge of a complete mess, a huge mound of unsorted rubbish, rummaging in which you might come across a random detail that reminds you of something that was perhaps not very pleasant, and then you throw it back onto the rubbish tip. Or perhaps it's the opposite – this detail, even if it's just a shred of information, twangs a string deep in your soul, and that string rings out, reviving some old and long forgotten melody, a melody that draws you into a sweet vortex of a unique thrill that you experienced many years earlier. Like old photos or an amateur video, where you captured somebody or somebody captured you. Like a pleasant dream that you don't want to end, that you want to last forever (sometimes, I even naively hope that death will be a languid, gentle eternal dream).

I belong to the second type of “warehousemen”. I am an inconsistent and impulsive person, who first does and only then thinks about what I have done. I am an ordinary, vulnerable woman, in which a womanly nature lived and lives, found joy and finds joy, suffered and suffers, in the full sense of those words. The way I see it, selfishness and a desire for independence somehow manage to coexist inside me with love for the people surrounding me and a subconscious wish to be a woman protected by a man who lives for me – protected by him from all sorts of major and minor everyday troubles.

I will be candid in this book. Misha will forgive me. Just as he always forgave me. Because he loved me – well, I’m going to believe so, anyway.

I want to say sorry in advance to those people I neglect to mention when I talk about Misha’s friends. Like I said, I’m the second type of warehouseman of memory, all the more so as, following Misha’s death, a huge number of people suddenly claimed to have been his “friend”. Well, believe me – while Misha was alive most of them didn’t even have the right to claim to know him much. But that often happens – after the death of a celebrity the latter suddenly acquires friends, classmates, distant relatives. Just like Mayakovsky and Vysotsky. I say, let’s forgive people this weakness, it seems to be a subconscious – or even conscious – desire to increase their importance for the rest of their life.

I also want to apologize in advance for deliberately omitting certain people’s names. I just don’t want to make them or their families uncomfortable, and far less to outright embarrass them. Maybe they didn’t do any wrong to Misha, but, as they say, better safe than sorry. If you recognize those names, then fine, and if you don’t, then it’s probably for the best: sometimes we should let sleeping dogs lie.

But I want to make clear: I will not hide anything about my life. Really, there is nothing about it to hide. Not even my age. Actually, I'm always a little amused at women who hide their age. It's fine when you're young to add or subtract a few years depending on the circumstances – harmless, purely feminine tricks. But when you're older?!

I can tell you loud and proud: I was born in Vitebsk, in Soviet Belorussia, in 1938. And so that nobody is subsequently disappointed, I'll say right now that my parents were Jewish actors. My father's surname, Landau, which I bear today, is all I have in common with the famous physicist Lev Davidovich Landau, even though many people were convinced that I came from that same family. Well, that mistake is easy to understand: members of ethnic minorities like to believe that they are unusual – if the great Mikhail Tal married Sally Landau, then surely Sally would have been the daughter, or, at worst, the niece of that learned man! Alas, Mikhail Tal married the daughter of two little-known actors.

My mother performed on stage from the age of 13. I don't want to exaggerate – this was not the result of any precocious talent, although as I later discovered she was a good actress. Mother's early professional steps were down to purely worldly circumstances: she had five siblings in the family and they had nothing to eat, so she had to earn money to survive. She won a place at the theatrical institute in Minsk, which is where she met my dad.

My father had quite a remarkable personality. Not to mention his intelligence, acting skills, wicked and yet unusual sense of humor. Misha, I'm pleased to report, adored him. Dad was also a highly talented musician. He could play seven instruments. He was a fantastic light baritone. He was a qualified conductor. Once, Solomon Mikhoels noticed my father on stage. He

showered him with praise and, if I'm not mistaken, even invited my father to join his theater. But, as they say, man plans and God laughs. The War with Germany began and it impacted not only my parents' lives...

I was two-and-a-half when Germany invaded, and so I don't remember very much. However, my parents told me that when war broke out I was staying with my grandmother in Vitebsk. The theater where my parents worked would tour throughout the Soviet Union, and when that happened they sent me to grandmother's. The fascist army got so close that my grandmother and my two aunts were forced to literally drop everything and evacuate to Siberia. I have vague memories of a hot, crammed train. And bombings, during which, due to my age, I felt no danger and couldn't understand why my grandmother would smother my body with hers as soon as aircraft appeared in the sky.

One thing I've noticed is that people tend to remember smells from childhood – even now, I associate the word “war” with the smell of boiled eggs and my grandmother's unique fragrance.

Mum and Dad lost us at that point. I later learnt that this was not unusual for that moment in time. The War had broken out in the summer. Many people lost track of their children, brothers and sisters. Many didn't manage to find them even after the War ended. As I said, my memories of those days are vague. And as I mostly lived with my grandmother I actually thought that she was my mother! Grandmother would often say: “Look Sallynka, Mum and Dad will turn up soon.” For me that was like an empty sound, an abstract notion. I would ask in reply: “Do I have a second mother?” Grandmother attempted to explain, but I didn't understand.

A few fragments from our Siberian evacuation remain etched in my memory: very kind people, a constant hungry feeling and

the whitest of snow under an ardent sun – so much that my eyes watered. Oh, and I clearly remember that people would come to our home, grandmother would plant me on a stool and I would sing. I would sing the patriotic Russian songs *Katyusha* and *Zemlyanka*. Of course, I didn't understand their significance, but I sang them anyway. I had a funny little voice (that's what my parents and grandmother told me later), as well as a perfect pitch. Well, people didn't come to our home empty-handed. Some brought milk, others brought eggs. Basically, I was earning my keep through performances from the age of about two-and-a-half.

It then transpired that my parents had turned up in Tashkent, and the Red Cross later found us for them. My Auntie Riva, who was only 13 years older than me, came for me and took me to Tashkent. By that time I was already five years old and it was as though I now met my parents for the first time. I spent a long time calling them “Vy” after that.²

To feed themselves, my parents gave illegal concerts on the side and took me with them. At those concerts, I was already singing, accompanied by an orchestra. Basically, I had transformed into a child prodigy. Everybody said that I had a wonderful voice with a range of two octaves. And there was nothing I enjoyed more. Of course, everything is relative – one of my most persistent memories of childhood during the War remains that of constant hunger.

Then I began to sing on the radio, accompanied by my aunt. It was she who insisted that I join the Tashkent music school at the age of six.

² The formal form of “you” in Russian, rather than the familiar form “ty” which is the equivalent of “thou” in old English (like “vous” and “tu” in French). Normally, a child addresses a parent as “ty” in Russian



The day we got married



Misha had once taken my photo off the wall of a theater foyer and pocketed it. Since then, he insisted on taking that photo with him permanently. Like a lucky charm. “Your photo brings me luck,” he told me. One day, when Misha was flying off to Sochi, we forgot in the rush to put that photo in his luggage. And guess what? In Sochi, Misha was caught in a car accident. Fortunately, it was nothing serious. But afterwards he would say that had my photo been with him the accident wouldn’t have happened.

Generally speaking, Misha believed in omens. After I emigrated, I once came to visit him in Brussels during a tournament. I was shocked at his awful suit, crumpled and dirty shirt, and shoes with worn out heels. It wasn’t that he didn’t have any money. Of course he had money. But he just didn’t seem to care about himself. And I told him: “Misha! If you’re going to go around looking like that I won’t come and visit you again! It’s embarrassing!” So Ratko Knezevic and I went out and bought him a new suit, shirt, tie and shoes, and we just about had to use force to get him to wear them. That day, he lost his game and was furious. “This is all down to your masquerade!” he complained. “Mishanka!” I replied, “don’t tell me you never lost a game in your old shirt!” “In my old shirt I lose because it’s my fault,” he retorted, “but in this peasant outfit I lose because it’s your fault... See the difference?”

So to return to Fischer – when Misha showed him that same photo, Bobby spent a considerable amount of time admiring it, and then simply expropriated it from Misha. He as though borrowed it but never gave it back. If Fischer came across us on the beach he would come and sit with us, unceremoniously shoving Misha away with his elbow and engaging me in long conversations. He spoke in broken Russian. Given that the most important chess literature was published at the time in the USSR he had learnt some of the language. Bobby had only

gained a limited schooling, and when I asked him why he'd never graduated from school, he replied: "Because school got in the way of my chess." He was an amusing guy. A local millionaire invited us to a little restaurant on the other side of the island. Fischer sat in the car next to me and turned the radio on. He found a channel where some guy was singing and suddenly began to sing loudly alongside him. He was tone-deaf! A truly awful voice! And then he said to me in total seriousness: "If I weren't a great chess player I would have become a great singer."

...One day, a very young Fischer showed up at the excellent baritone Smyslov's hotel room during a rest period and started to hum something. Vasily Vasilevich, who was by nature a very gentle person, told him: "Bobby! You are really talented!" These words put wind in the American grandmaster's sails. Two years later, there was Fischer telling everybody what a great singer he was. During the tournament in Bled [the 1959 candidates tournament] we played a little trick on him. One evening, we all gathered in a bar where an orchestra was playing, accompanying a singer. Somebody had a word with the compere and we heard him announce: "Ladies and gentlemen! We are now going to be treated to a performance by the amazing American chess player and singer Robert James Fischer!" Fischer got all shy but nevertheless took the microphone. He sang, let's say, idiosyncratically. The audience nevertheless gave him a huge ovation. He then headed back to his seat, accepting the congratulations, and stopped by Paul Keres's table. Keres told him: "You should give up chess and switch to singing." Whereupon Fischer replied: "Yes, I know, but I'm too good at chess."

Mikhail Tal, extract from an interview in 64, 1979

Misha was very nice to Bobby and treated him humorously. Apparently, he once beat Fischer and then decided to goof

around with: “Bobby! Cuckoo!” Fischer burst into tears like an infant. But Misha was the first person to say that Fischer was a real genius and a future world champion.

Actually, Misha had great relations with almost every chess player. He was especially close to Petrosian, Karpov and Geller. He treated Korchnoi respectfully, tactfully, which you couldn’t have said about me – I wasn’t fond of the man at all.

Paul Keres also stood out among the humdrum crowd. Handsome, respectable looking, polite and genuinely sporty. He was a fantastic swimmer, and every morning at eight a.m. you would find him in the pool. During a rest day, when we were getting ready to descend to breakfast, Misha told me: “Go downstairs, take a swim with Keres, go for breakfast and I’ll arrive shortly.”

Breakfast was over. We were all sunbathing by the pool, but Misha and Fischer hadn’t shown up. Fischer always ignored the swimming pool anyway – he would spend his entire time studying chess in his room. An hour passed, then another, then another... Still no Misha. I checked our room several times, but he wasn’t there. The head of our delegation, Yuri Averbakh, as well as the “art expert in civilian clothes”, started to worry. They even sent people over to French quarter. Misha wasn’t there either and we still had no news. Lunch came and went and I got very worried. In fact, everybody got worried. I started to fear that something serious had happened – Misha was always prone to illness, after all. Anything could have happened. Nightfall approached. Nobody could go to bed – they all hung around the large hotel lobby on the second floor, everybody proffering their own version of events.

And then suddenly, at midnight, the door of the press center opened. The center was closed on rest days and its door was normally locked. Two completely bedraggled men emerged with mad eyes – Misha and Bobby. Misha walked past me, clearly