



SHORTS

OBSOLESCENCE

I have grown so accustomed to being the most senior participant in tournaments these days that I prefer to ham it up and tell the credulous youth that I once played a match with Lasker. Unlike many of my other ripping yarns, this one happens to be true – if a tad misleading. The Lasker in question was Edward (born in 1885), and not his more famous distant cousin, Emanuel, who died in 1941, while my mother lay swaddled in her cot. And nor did I play *against* the grand old man himself, although he was a member of the opposing team. The occasion was the Lloyds Bank Trophy, a London-New York telex match, held on the 11th of September 1976, which was won with regrettable ease by our upstart, former colonial subjects, the Americans. I did, however, have the satisfaction of downing Joel Benjamin on a junior board, while Sir Stuart Milner Barry KCVO CB OBE – a whippersnapper of 70 – defeated his nonagenarian adversary.

Telex, for those who have not studied ancient history, was an exceedingly primitive means of electronic communication that fleetingly existed, although never thrived, before being supplanted by the fax – another piece of antiquated machinery. In what passed as technological sophistication back then, this method of transmission had all the speed of carrier pigeons, but minus the guano. To general ululation of the unfortunate partakers, there was a brief vogue within the British Chess Federation for supporting this type of competition. We apparently even entered a mini 'Telechess Olympiad', in 1981-2, which was won by the USSR. I say 'apparently' because, although involved, I had absolutely no idea it was an Olympiad until I began researching this article. I do recall my two games though. The English side of the match against Israel was held at Bank Leumi (appropriately enough, formerly known as the Anglo-Palestine Company) in London. Unfortunately, despite a formidably wearying 9-hour session, Balshan and I managed to make only a handful of moves before the game and those of three others were sent for adjudication! To this day, I do not know the final result. With no visible opponent and a glacial tempo, it did not make a

compelling spectacle, to put it mildly – although, astonishingly, as many as sixty people showed up to witness our encounter versus the Russians. Once in a while, a volunteer relayer would emerge from the mysterious telex room with a new move to relieve the tedium. Even with the odd official observer to ensure fair play, opportunities for cheating were rife. Affairs were so dull that it was unreasonable to expect participators to remain motivated throughout. Avoiding discussion of current positions with team-mates was thus a matter of personal integrity. Against the Soviets, I avoided both boredom and the injustice of adjudication only by being the first to lose – capitulating to a devastating sacrificial onslaught by the late, talented Viktor Kupreichik from Minsk. Nevertheless this 'brevity' took no less than four hours and forty minutes to complete.

Chess by telex was such a manifestly unsatisfactory means of conducting our beautiful game that it swiftly slipped, unlamented, into obsolescence. 'All things must pass', as the great Liverpoolian philosopher, George Harrison, once said. Clearly though, the former Beatle had never heard of competitive correspondence chess. If ever an activity should have long ago expired and been

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buried with dignity, it is surely that. Against the laws of nature itself, grotesquely, it lives on.

Correspondence chess has a long and, in many ways, distinguished history. Thomas Hyde, in 'De Ludis Orientalibus' (published in 1694), writes of Venetian and Croatian merchants playing thus. But it was not until the seminal Edinburgh-London match (superbly covered in Tim Harding's *Correspondence Chess in Britain and Ireland, 1824-1987*) that it attracted widespread attention. It is, perhaps, important to consider why. This was no gentle exchange of epistolary pleasantries between dear, distant friends, but rather a fiercely contested challenge with large sums wagered on the outcome. Indeed, arguments raged in public for years afterwards, particularly on the ethics of London