

The Berlin Defence

A Novel

Andy Mack

The Berlin Defence: A Novel

Author: Andy Mack

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov (www.elkov.ru)

Cover page drawing by Anna Fokina Illustration Studio (www.fox-artwork.com)

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*To my mother and father, Sylvia and Laurie,
who encouraged my love of chess, the game of Kings*

PROLOGUE

NO ONE IS COMPLETELY ON YOUR SIDE

Schönefeld Airport, September 1986

Breathe slowly, he told himself. Hold your nerve.

Taking his seat towards the rear of the plane, Lothar Hartmann did his best to stay composed. The security at check-in had been tight, even by East German standards. The guards had rifled through his luggage, searched his jacket and his trouser pockets, and examined the insides of his shoes. What they thought they were looking for, heaven only knew. Mystified by the pages of obscure typescript and symbols, they had also wanted to confiscate his notebooks, until he pointed out that the books contained his secret analysis, the product of all that hard work at home, and he would be unable to compete without them. Of all people, it took Neuer, the head of their group, to intervene on his behalf.

As the plane charged down the runway, his mind raced and he thought again about the possibilities that lay ahead. It would be dangerous, that was true. But what other course of action did he have? Clutching onto the armrest until his fingers began to ache, he steeled his resolve. To his left sat his teammates, their heads down, immersed in their books and pocket sets. Behind him were the Stasi men, grey and impervious, watching every move, even in this tiny tin box. Of course if they had known what was going to happen next, they would never have allowed him to leave East Germany. But not even the Stasi, all-seeing, all-knowing, can read minds.

PART ONE – THE OPENING

CHAPTER ONE

Bobby Fischer versus the World

When reason fails, the devil helps.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

East Berlin, 1967

It was the year they took away his uncle.

Sitting cross-legged in the centre of the living room, Lothar stared at the pieces of the puzzle scattered on the wooden floorboards in front of him. To the untrained eye, the jigsaw was a jumbled mess of jagged edges and unexplained curves. That was what he liked about it. First you looked for the corners, then the straight lines. You put the pieces together, one by one, until you had created order and harmony. Reaching across for a piece of concrete grey – a dark cloud, perhaps – he heard the voices from the kitchen again. Keeping still, holding his breath for as long as he dared, he tried to make sense of the conversation.

‘Sack you? They can’t do that, can they?’ His father’s voice sounded tired and strained, heavier than normal.

‘They just did.’ It was Uncle Leon. Lothar loved his parents, but Leon – with his ready good humour, his words of encouragement, a smile for all occasions – held hero status for him. He wanted to run through to the kitchen and see his uncle, throw his arms around him, his usual greeting.

This time, though, was different. His mother had shut the living room door firmly behind her. ‘Stay here, Lothar, until I come and get you.’ By the age of eight he knew better than to disobey her.

Lothar shuffled quietly across the floor and put his ear against the crack in the door. ‘Who did it?’ he heard his father ask.

‘Who sacked me?’

‘No. Who informed on you?’ There was a pause. ‘I assume that’s what must have happened. You wouldn’t have lost your job otherwise.’

Now a woman’s voice. Lothar recognised the soft, sympathetic tone of his aunt, Deborah. She sounded like she had been crying. ‘We think it was the neighbours. But who can be certain?’ There was another pause. Lothar imagined his aunt dabbing the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. The voices resumed. ‘How do we pay the rent? No income, no savings. We’ll be out on the street before we know it.’

That evening, Lothar’s father pulled his grey toolbox from the cupboard by the front door. Taking a hammer, some nails and a piece of old plywood which he had found discarded in the courtyard below the flats, he fixed up a partition in the main bedroom so that one room became two. ‘I told you I should have been a carpenter,’ he said, allowing himself a smile for the first time that day and wiping his hands against his overall like a blacksmith. ‘A job well done, if I say so myself.’

Leon and Deborah moved in soon after. Lothar was relieved his parents had not made him give up his box room. Situated next to the kitchen, it occupied the best spot in the flat, perfectly placed for those times when, waking early, he wanted to sneak out before dawn and examine the bin for scraps of uneaten food.

On Lothar’s ninth birthday, Leon took him fishing. Awake and changed soon after six, filled with expectation for the day ahead, Lothar spent the morning sitting on a kitchen stool in his raincoat, practising his grip on his small home-made

fishing rod. By the time they left home, shortly before eleven, he already felt himself a proficient fisherman. Of course, they had little success. But just being with his uncle, enjoying the gentle ripples of the stream, the quiet contemplation, Leon's hug of congratulation when he finally caught a small carp, was enough. Spending these moments with his uncle was so relaxing, so different from the turbulence of the city, with its sad, scowling faces, black briefcases and brown overcoats. He couldn't remember a time when he had felt so happy.

As they walked along the pathway by the river, back towards the town, with its dirty chimneys and prefabricated flats, he fixed his eyes on the grey factory smoke, heavy in the air like a fog, which cast a filthy pallor over them. Reaching a gate, Leon took his nephew by the hand, helping him to clamber over the wooden stile and through to the other side. 'You know, Lothar, this walk holds fond memories for me.'

Lothar looked up at his uncle enquiringly.

'It was the year I met your aunt,' he said, smiling. 'I took her fishing, the same spot we've been today. On the way back, I asked her to marry me.'

'What year was that?' Lothar asked, trying to do the maths in his head, a little embarrassed that he had no idea how old his uncle was.

'1953, Lothar. A good time it was, too. The war was behind us, the Berlin Wall wasn't even a glimmer in Walter Ulbricht's eye.' Leon stubbed his cigarette out on the ground. 'We thought that if we challenged the state, the politicians would listen. We were wrong.'

Leon loved football, and every other Saturday he took Lothar to watch Union Berlin. A poor team, forever at the foot of the table, Union were overshadowed in every respect by their illustrious neighbours, Dynamo Berlin. Dynamo had

the famous players, the larger stadium. ‘Even the soldiers at Dynamo are more professional,’ said Leon sardonically, as they watched a young lad in military uniform, standing just behind the Union goal, fiddle awkwardly with his rifle before slipping over on the wet turf.

‘Did you ever think of supporting Dynamo?’ Lothar asked, conscious that he was the only boy in his class who followed Union.

‘Think of it? I did follow them.’ Leon shook his head at the memory of it. ‘But then corruption took hold, they became the government-sponsored team. I wanted nothing to do with them after that.’ Leon gripped Lothar’s shoulder. ‘A lesson in life. It’s easy to follow the crowd. Much harder to be your own man, to support the underdog.’

At that moment, as he looked up at his uncle, with his broad shoulders, his Roman nose, his dignity, his conviction, Lothar decided what he wanted to do with his life. He would find something that he was good at – a sport perhaps, or a field of science – and he would practise, he would work harder than anyone else. He would succeed on his own merits. He would be the best at what he did, and he would make his uncle proud.

One bleak winter’s day, the rain lashing down on him until he was soaked through to the skin, Lothar ran home from school, overwhelmed by dark feelings. Inside the flat, he found his aunt at the kitchen table crying, his mother by her side. His father was pacing up and down the hall, muttering to himself, occasionally punching his hand against the wall.

‘What’s happened, Dad? Where’s Uncle Leon?’

Collecting himself, Lothar’s father led him into the living room, sitting next to the boy on the sofa.

‘Two policemen came around, Lothar. Members of the Stasi. They’ve arrested Leon.’

‘Why?’

‘They had a warrant. They searched the flat and found some of his writing. They claim it’s anti-government.’

‘What do we do now?’

His father put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I’m not sure we can do anything, other than wait.’

That night, Lothar slept badly, tossing and turning as he worried about his uncle. When he did drift off to sleep, his dreams were troubled. He imagined a dark figure in a long cloak standing at the end of his bed, and when he awoke, he was in a cold sweat, petrified that demons had come to take him away too.

Leon was in jail for six months. Shortly after his release, Lothar’s uncle and aunt escaped the country, hiding in the boot of a West German friend’s car as he crossed the border. Too young to understand what had happened, Lothar missed his uncle and aunt more than he could say. He felt lost without their laughter and smiles, he mourned the loss of the afternoons spent fishing or watching football. More than anything, he worried about what would happen to them in the West. How would they survive? Would they find work? Where would they get money from?

Before he left, Leon had taught Lothar to play chess. ‘A game for champions,’ he said, as he gave Lothar a battered old chess set, which he himself had owned since he was a boy. A tangible memory of his uncle, it became Lothar’s most treasured possession. He loved the way that the wooden pieces, long since shorn of their varnish, danced across the board in their own magical ballet. One day, he told himself, they would dance to his tune.