

**Benjamin Heisenberg**

***Lukush***

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In the summer of 2021, Prof Burkhard Ritter and his wife Agnes approached me to ask whether I could help them publish documents collated by their son Simon Ritter. At that point, Simon had been missing for over a year, but his parents were determined to exploit every opportunity to maintain public interest in the search for their son. It went without saying that I would support them by all means at my disposal.

I have been friends with Simon Ritter since our childhood days. He grew up a stone's throw away from me, in the village of Ückershausen near Würzburg. We enjoyed spending time together in the local football club, on the way to school, at confirmation classes and on long excursions into Würzburg's nightlife. Although we were both drawn to the film industry, we lost contact after leaving school. The last time I met him was at a twenty-year school reunion in a Würzburg jazz bar, in 2013. Even then, we spoke about the young chess prodigy Anton Lukush and his companion Igor Shevchuk, later Nazarenko, who had lived with the Ritters as refugee children from Chernobyl in the late 1980s.

The 2019 appearance in Germany of Igor Shevchuk, alias Nazarenko, was what prompted Simon's research that took him to Kyiv, and from there to Pripjat near Chernobyl. It was there that he disappeared on 6 February 2020, in the area of the nuclear pile made famous by the reactor disaster in 1986. He had visited relatives of Lukush nearby, earlier that day, traveling under a false identity to protect himself. He was last seen boarding a bus back to Kyiv. The search in Ukraine, Belarus and Germany was complicated by the onset of the pandemic and more recently by the war in Ukraine. To this day, all investigations have remained fruitless.

A collection of various images, texts and books was found in his luggage, in his Kyiv hotel room. They are evidence that he was researching for a film or novel on the story of Anton Lukusch and his companion Igor Shevchuk. In the course of this work, it appears he had come across a criminal network of internationally operating companies. As his parents report, a large part of his research and notes was removed from his house in Ückershausen shortly before his disappearance, and presumably destroyed.

It remains unclear whether the convolute of material published herein was collected and written by Ritter alone, or in conjunction with others. For the most part, the documents are published in the order

in which they were found. In the case of parts obviously in the wrong order due to transport or reading, I have done my utmost to compile them chronologically and according to content.

Simon's disappearance and the suffering caused to his parents affect me deeply. As editor of his writing, I hope to make a small contribution towards establishing what may have happened to him.

Lucerne, March 2022

Benjamin Heisenberg



### **Helmut Kohl vs. Anton Lukusch, West German chancellery, Bonn, 1987**

THAT WAS THE 1980S, LTV

December 1990

LUKUSCH

By Guntram Heinrich

In 1987, two years before the GDR opened up, the story of a boy from the then Soviet Union touched the Germans' hearts. Little Anton Lukush had come to Germany with the NGO Shelta, as part of a group of Chernobyl refugees: hundreds of children, sent by their parents to the West to escape exposure to radiation. Lukush, from a simple country background like most of them, made little impression within the group to begin with. When people spoke of him, it was mainly due to his remarkable connection to a strong boy by the name of Igor. The two of them had witnessed the reactor accident together at close quarters and had been treated in the same hospital. Since then, neither had left the other's side.

Anton Lukush was only noticed when he happened to discover the game of chess. In only a few days, he managed to beat all his classmates at chess, followed by all their teachers. None of his subsequent opponents from the families hosting the group stood a chance against him.

In retrospect, one might have thought Lukush had only come to the West to give a short and stunning guest performance of his genius, only to then vanish again as unexpectedly as he had appeared.

After a three-week interim phase, during which he was passed around chess clubs as a curiosity, a further fortunate circumstance helped the grandmaster-to-be to make his final breakthrough. The radiation refugees received an invitation to the Federal Chancellery in Bonn. They were to be

received in front of the press corps as publicity for the Chernobyl campaign. Naturally, the young discovery was presented to the chancellor. In their first match, Helmut Kohl was hopelessly outplayed; in the second round, Lukush granted him a polite draw through a seemingly accidental sacrifice. In the midst of the 1987 silly season, the outcome hit the headlines and guaranteed the Chernobyl programme's existence for years to come.

Anton Lukush gained a genuine fan and an influential patron in the German chancellor. He was soon being taught at the most renowned chess schools and playing the German elite and international stars, but his own king rarely fell.

In 1988 Bernd Schulthess, a businessman from the Siegerland region, offered to fund the boy's training. From then on, Lukush lived in industrious isolation in a remote castle, accompanied only by his unequal shadow Igor. During this period, the two radiation refugees' entourage consisted of a carer, a cook, a chauffeur and at times two security men.

The events of 1989 came thick and fast and Lukush was gradually forgotten. By the time he returned to the public eye in the spring of 1990 with a match against the NEC SX-3/44R supercomputer, he was seeded at number 45 and had already played all the top-ranking figures. As the press learned, he had been employed in the meantime as a corporate consultant, due to his extraordinary analytical abilities. Though he garnered little attention in Germany, his match against the feared computer brought him international respect. It was only then that Russian television reported on him, celebrating him as Karpov junior.

Several weeks after this honour, three years after Anton had come to Germany, a television news network in Kyiv received a letter from his grandmother Valya Lukush, enquiring after the precise address of her grandson Anton Lukush, now a celebrity in the West. A camera crew went to the small Ukrainian village where the Lukushs had resettled and persuaded Anton's grandmother to visit Germany. The team accompanied her, wanting to record her being reunited with her famous grandson for public consumption.

What happened next, however, defied all expectations. During the tour of the palace where Lukush lived, the camera picked up Valya Lukush's expression darkening by the minute, and when it was over she took Anton's hand. She made it clear that the conditions and customs her grandson was living under were absolutely not in line with her ideas of a good upbringing and she would therefore take Anton and Igor back to Ukraine. Begging and pleading was no use; she left the country with the two boys.

Lukush played only a few more matches. He vanished from the public eye as fast as he had come, leaving no real traces and without being affected himself. In an interview with Ukrainian media, he described his fate calmly as a path guided by a higher hand over which he had no influence, but to which he looked forward every day anew, with anticipation.



'You're early, Ritter!' Jochen Wehner, the man who discovered Anton Lukush's chess talent back in '87, grins at me. I mumble an apology but it doesn't seem to interest him. The flash in his eyes reveals that he loves provocation. He adjusts his tight T-shirt as I squeeze past him through the door. My shoulder accidentally brushes against his well-trained chest. I can smell him, and his deodorant on top. He registers all that with pleasure. A minute ago, he was probably steeling his toned sixty-nine-year-old muscles and is simply proud of them. Since I tracked him down on Facebook and we became friends there, he has regularly posted pictures of his torso under a taut T-shirt; in other words, I know how it looks. He often photographs himself from the neck down, which makes him look twenty years younger. Anyone comparing his profile picture with his postings must doubt whether the head of this older man with the thinning grey hair and the insecure smile is really on top of the muscleman body.

Jochen Wehner's life has been shaped by three passions and one love. He admits as much during a short tour of a house, which he insists on giving me. The house isn't big so the tour is short, but the man has a lot to tell me. Actually, he says, there were two loves, but his dog Ares died six years ago. Wehner is a passionate collector of art and photos of his passions and love, meaning I know the answer long before he finally comes out with it himself. The only thing he delivers subsequently is the classification of which of the subjects are passions and which is love.

Passions:

Henriette (his wife)

Chess

Fitness training

Love:

Maria (his daughter)

His wife Henriette is obviously a passion. She chose him back in their schooldays. He was still a talented young footballer, a strong dribbler and not exactly stupid in the head. She was always bold and

demanding, prom queen. He conquered her heart and never let her go again. But it came at a cost. Especially because Wehner's career path was anything but straight. He dropped out of a sports studies degree due to a slipped disc during weight training, followed by a painful six-month break. Henriette refused to work. She was already pregnant with Maria. After that, it was high time to make money for everything a young family with such a demanding mother might need. So Wehner signed up with his schoolmate Häusermann's travel company. He drove a coach for years (having got his category P licence during military service). Henriette never talked about his job, not to him, not to their little daughter, and not to anyone else. She had married a future sports star, or at least a future sports scientist – not a coach driver.

Wehner went on studying by distance learning, in the evenings when Henriette was watching TV and Maria was asleep. He had to watch out not to fall asleep at the wheel during the day, but the kids and pensioners he ferried around made him happy. While his passengers ploughed through palaces, theme parks and outlet centres, he used his breaks for fitness training or to replay Karpov's and Kasparov's famous chess games on his little battery-driven Mephisto 2000. Why the chess computer had been named Mephisto, he couldn't say at first, but at some point, during a messed-up match, he realised that the device was leading him, Dr Faustus, into a hell of infuriating variants. He had to go there to test the boundaries of his mental abilities and pit himself against the chess gods, for whom Mephisto was an electronic midget in the depths of the chess circus.

'A bit monothematic, eh?'

He must have noticed my eyes on the umpteenth oil painting of a chessboard. Other than that, all the other pictures are of Henriette and Maria in all sorts of situations.

He opens a small wooden wall cabinet at the point where the stairs to the upper floor make a bend. He's succeeded in surprising me. I can barely believe it, swallowing my comment on the pictures into the strange sound I emit. Anton Lukush stares at me from the cabinet, or at least his eyes do. I know the photo the painter copied it from. He's captured the gaze; Lukush's physiognomy less so. Anton looks back at me with that expression of a stoic donkey, unreadable but deep and calm and patient. Nature resting in nature. No distance between inside and outside, no irony, no drama – lines from a song, *einfach Kurt, ohne Helm und ohne Gurt, einfach Kurt*, pop into my head. *Simply Kurt, needs no helmet needs no belt, simply Kurt.*

'Not even Henni knows I've got this here,' Wehner grins. 'She thinks this is my tool cupboard.' He gives a loud laugh. 'Amazing, eh? Willi did this one as well.' Willi is a friend, another man to have fallen into the family/coach-driver trap but now the most successful portrait painter in all of Greater Ochsenfurt.

'That was October '87, Kleinrinderfeld chess championship,' I say. 'Eighteen wins, no draws.'

'Call me Jochen,' Wehner says, squeezing my hand so hard I can't appreciate his sudden affection.

My 'Simon' comes out squashed.

'Amazing! I was so glad to read your message on Facebook. I haven't heard a thing from Anton since the boy's *Omma* picked him up in 1990.' He pronounces the German word *Oma* (*German for Granny*) with two Ms, as they do in Franconia. 'The only one who still talks to me about the boy is old Jörg from chess club, but he's stopped coming these days – prostate trouble.'

Wehner is a goldmine. I suspected he would be. He not only recorded every TV show Lukush was on; he also kept clippings of all the articles. As he shows me his digitalised Super-8 footage of Lukush, he talks at me uninterrupted.

'Henni doesn't want to hear another word about the boy! She almost left me back then, over the lottery ticket.'

That's a story I haven't heard before.

'No one's heard it,' he smiles. 'That's why I got you round here today, 'cause Henni's at her physio. She hates the story. If I hadn't hidden it in my tool cupboard it'd all be destroyed by now. She means well, but she says you got to look ahead in life, specially if you're always getting worked up when you think back. She's all about positive mentality, Henni is.'

If that's not a passion...

Let's start at the very beginning. I read the story once before in a copy of *Schach Echo* from 1988, but I hope hearing it from Wehner himself will help me better understand the path of the forgotten young genius Anton Lukush.

'I felt bad for those kids,' Wehner sighs. 'I saw they weren't from the West the first time they got on my coach. It wasn't just their clothes, it was their pale faces and the way they stared at everything and all. We went to Sommerhausen Zoo and then for lunch at the Hotel Sonne at the Biebelried Junction. The hotel owner set up this little outdoor buffet for the kids, sandwiches and a couple of treats, and they ate every last crumb. Afterwards two girls sicked up in my coach from stuffing themselves. I wasn't thrilled about that, I can tell you, but what can you do? Poor kids. After that I took them to Homburg Castle at Gössenheim, this ruin in the forest, heading towards Veitshöchheim, Zelligen, Karlstadt if you're coming from Würzburg. And the kids ran around the woods and played hide and seek. I was on the coach listening to music and playing chess on my Mephisto. I used to charge it on the 12-volt cigarette lighter. Anyway, then Mr Schombert brought Anton back to the coach 'cause he'd been rolling in the leaves fighting another boy, and fallen in a puddle. Filthy from head to toe, he was. So Schombert left him with me to get changed and warm up a bit. I didn't take much notice of him 'cause I was in the middle of a tricky game. Anton wanted to have a go on some little Nintendo thing at the back – but the battery was dead. Just think – if that battery hadn't run out, it all could have been totally different!'

Wehner pauses for effect and gives me a meaningful look. 'Totally different.'

I hold his glance.

'It would have changed a lot for me, and for a few others and all. Not for Anton, though, I don't think.' Jochen Wehner's path with Lukush reminds me of a classic Zen aphorism:

*When I began to study, mountains were mountains. When I thought I understood Zen, the mountains no longer seemed to be mountains, but once I understood Zen, mountains were mountains again.*

Lukush never took that path, and seems never to have needed to. But to those who accompanied his star's metaphorical rise and later his brisk disappearance, it must have seemed like a strange dream, in which mountains were suddenly no longer mountains and everything seemed possible for a while.

'I'd rested my Mephisto on the dashboard. I remember it like yesterday – they were playing that techno tune 'Big Fun' on the radio. I used the beat to stop me from thinking too long. Anton came to the front and stood next to me. Just like that – didn't say a thing. I just looked up, gave him a nod and then took no notice of him. The boy followed the game, and that started to stress me 'cause I was losing big to Karpov. I mean, I always lost to Karpov, obviously, but not with somebody watching. He didn't know who Karpov was; he just saw I was losing. At some point I lost my rag, leaned back and gave up the game.'

Wehner hesitates, smiling. 'The boy can't have noticed how teed off I was. By then he'd started understanding the moves and thinking ahead, but I didn't realise that until we started playing.'

He turns off the TV and stares into space. Unconsciously, he contracts his right bicep and then the left one. It seems to be a habit of his when he's thinking: left, right, left, right, left, left ... I suddenly lose my concentration, and I miss a few sentences.

'No, he didn't say much but he was very polite. He looked a bit simple at first, mind you, when you didn't know him.' Jochen Wehner laughs again. "If he can take time," Anton answered. He! So I explained the whole game to him and soon noticed he'd long since worked it out for himself. Just things like castling, he couldn't know all that, of course. But by then I'd started taking an interest in him 'cause he was so clued-up.'

They played: Anton sitting in a relaxed position to one side, the man focusing frontally on the board. Outside, the kids ran around the forest, grilling sausages and singing Ukrainian and German songs. Inside the coach, Wehner and the boy descended into a world of black and white squares. Anton's life, previously unconscious, organic, determined by fate, was soon to be cast into all too structured moulds. His skills were spotted. He was categorised and challenged, departmentalised and deployed. He had stepped onto the chessboard, and it soon became clear he wouldn't leave it as a pawn.

A key turns in the lock and Wehner suddenly grows hectic. He bundles all his Lukush paraphernalia into the aluminium case and puts it down beside the couch I'm sitting on, just in time. The woman in the

doorway is not what I expected. She has a strand of hair dyed dark and treats us to a friendly smile. Henriette still has the beauty of the class queen, but it's not as obvious now; it shines out from inside her.

'Mr Ritter's come about the sofa in the basement,' Wehner lies. 'It's no good to him, though.' She nods and he pushes me past her, outside. Did she recognise me? She must have got my name, but I can't tell from looking what she thinks.

By the car, he finishes his story in hushed tones. Anton and Wehner sat together all afternoon, utterly concentrated. He remembers one of his moves in particular, because at first Anton didn't move a muscle, then he raised his head with an angry look and shook his fist, playfully. He cursed in Ukrainian and asked the coach driver for a cup of tea. Wehner turned away to pour it. When he looked back at the chessboard, Anton had swapped two pieces. Wehner spotted it right away, laughed, and batted the boy's cap off his head. The boy had to put the game right and then they went on. A wind rose outside. Gusts whirled leaves around the coach. Anton made his next move. The first raindrops drummed against the big windows. The coach driver looked up briefly and then re-immersed himself in the game. A regular hurricane out there.

Shortly later came thunderous knocking on the coach door. The storm whipped through the children's clothes and hair. One of them held onto the next until they were inside the safety of the coach. Soaked through, they stumbled around and spread mud down the aisle and up the seats. Someone asked about Anton, but Wehner's comment that the boy had learned chess, only lost one game and then won five others, went unheard in the kids' noise. On the drive home, Wehner's eyes kept wandering in the mirror to Anton, who was sitting in his seat, concentrating on the little chess computer. All around him mayhem and Lukush blind and deaf to it, locked into the world of the game. Wehner, who had only discovered chess as an adult, felt an almost telepathic kinship with the boy: 'I drove off with the kids singing and screaming, but everything went quiet around me and all I could hear in my head was the sound of the pieces on the little board at the back of the coach. It was such a great drive ...'

Wehner remembers it all as if it were yesterday. Did he notice the hopeless crush I had on his daughter, back then? I can only vaguely recall the trip, myself. I wasn't interested in Anton at the time. In the first few weeks, he felt like a burden my parents had saddled me with. Later, he mostly got in my way when I was trying to see Maria, and at some point he became a friend, once I'd admitted to myself that Maria wasn't going to start anything with me.



**Display cabinet, German Chess Museum**

**Back, centre: Lukush's signature on the packaging of the Mephisto chess computer**

**Centre: Anton at his first chess tournament, SC Heuchelhof**

**Right: German Chess Prize certificate 1989, immigration documents**

**Left: binder with Dr Ritter's document collection**



Igor Shevchuk turned up again. On Eurosport, in a chess show from the Hessischer Hof in Frankfurt – I recognised him straight off. Today's Igor doesn't look much like the old one, but his eyes are still the same as they used to be. Dark brown, not open or alert, but with instinct and concentration that doesn't come from comprehending but from an absolute attention tunnel, in which he paralyses his opponent like a fat snake. He wears a suit and a roll-neck these days. His hair is combed down with gel with a pale parting between, like black bones along the pale spine of a fish.

Back then I imagined the sturdy boy would make a good businessman. I'd never have dreamed I'd see him again here in Germany, as a chess grandmaster.

But where is Anton Lukush? He's not in a single photo, a single TV report; but he must be somewhere close. Not for no reason does Igor crop up in so many old photos of Anton. They were literally inseparable, far beyond what the public knew back then. I've searched the footage from the Hessischer Hof over and over for a face that might resemble an older Anton. Perhaps he's always behind the camera or in another room, but he ought to have been visible in the TV reports, at least. Unless everything has changed since '87, he can't be far away.

Igor seems not to have mentioned his relationship to Anton Lukush, and apparently no one from the press has recognised him. He's adopted a different name, as well: Nazarenko. An Eurosport announcer talks over a clip of the luxurious Hessischer Hof hotel lobby in Frankfurt: 'Igor Nazarenko, the grandmaster from Minsk, speaks fluent German with the numerous journalists assailing the favourite for the Frankfurt Open.' The channel has filmed an interview with him, which they fade in. Igor speaks much more flawless German than I ever heard from him as a child: 'This is my first time at the Frankfurt Open – it's my first ever tournament in Germany, but I have a feeling the city of Goethe and Otto Hahn will bring me luck.' He omits the umlaut sound from the word for luck – says *Gluck* instead of *Glück* – but that's all that distinguishes him from a native speaker.

'How come you speak such good German, Herr Nazarenko?'

Igor's eyes narrow a fraction of an inch. 'A good friend taught me – I was here as a child, in holidays.'

'Good luck for the tournament!'

He says nothing, just nods.

Lukush spoke German, as the son of a Russian-German family; Igor, from a Belarusian background, hardly got a word out until the last day. He had no problem communicating with his hands and feet, or getting others to translate for him. But it's Igor, definitely. I've compared photos from my dad's album, and I studied his face at the time, like hardly any other. In 1987, one evening in the clinic, I turned my full attention on Igor for a few moments. His features etched themselves into my memory as my father and I tried to find out how inseparable the two of them really were.

Back then, the children from Chernobyl who'd been particularly badly affected had regular examinations in a German hospital. My dad made his attempt while the staff were changing shifts and there was no one on the ward for ten minutes or so. He'd told my mum he wanted to get me tested for a house-dust allergy at the clinic, but on the ward he admitted to me that I was part of a very different plan.

Anton and Igor were already asleep in front of the TV, and they didn't wake up when we undid the brakes on their beds and pushed them out of the room as carefully as we could, wheeling their medical devices along with us. Anton mumbled in his sleep several times, and scratched at the ECG electrodes stuck to his chest. We stopped and held our breath until he settled back down. My dad pushed Anton to the right, past the unoccupied nurses' room. I manoeuvred Igor, obeying my dad's hand signals, along the corridor to the east wing, metre by metre away from Anton, tense with anticipation to see what would happen. Igor had turned his head to one side and was breathing with a rattle, weighed down by his own body mass. I was so focused on him that I paid no attention to the distance from my dad and Anton, but only a little later we both stopped at the same time and looked around. The boys' faces had gone limp. No struggle, no drama, no waking up. Only the machines virtually exploding with warning signals. They both just went quiet as the life seeped out of them. Then all hell broke loose.

We just managed to get them back to their room before the place was crawling with nurses and doctors. Instants later, the first heartbeats showed up on the monitors. They didn't need reanimating but they weren't exactly doing well.

Later in the car, my dad started the engine but turned it straight off and exhaled audibly. 'Simon, that was so close!' He paused for a long time before he went on. 'That was astounding, to say the least.'

The monobrow, the mismatched wings of the nose, the mouth that still seems to be constantly smiling slightly on the left, and the heavy chin that even back then almost vanished into his fleshy neck. It's Igor, that's for sure. No idea why he's calling himself Nazarenko these days, and no idea why it's not Anton at the chessboard instead of him.