

ТӘЙЙИС

К&В

СТЧЛЭ

In an hilarious extract from his new book, *Hey Big Boy*, South African tennis star Abe Segal recalls a trip behind the Iron Curtain in the 1960s to play a Davis Cup match against the Communist-era Romanians.

We flew into Otopeni Airport in an old Russian Illjushin just above treetop level and under the illusion we were going to crash any minute. Not one member of that South African Davis Cup team escaped reaching for their sick bag. And by the time the Romanian pilot had jerked us around in the sky and then jerked us onto the runway,

we needed buckets. We were greeted by a Romanian tennis delegation which looked more like a firing squad. Some more men in raincoats then pitched up and promptly removed all our passports because they said we didn't have any relations in Bucharest. "If I DID have any cousins four times removed living here, I'd shoot them to put them out of their misery!" I declared to our team manager, Claude Lister. Claude was a top class guy and a member of the All England



Tennis Association. He lived in Bathgate Road, Wimbledon before James Hunt moved into the neighbourhood. But Claude had handled his fair share of hooligans and as a diplomat with a sense of humour, he was the ideal guy to be fending off firing squads.

I had a collection of Sinatra records buried in my suitcase, given to me by the even more deeply buried Chicago Boss, Jack Sklar. Somehow these escaped detection by the airport customs officials and one glance at our hotel told me that I needed to dig out 'New York, New York' immediately on arrival. This song always helped block out the reality of grim surroundings especially when the room was modelled on a Russian Gulag. And Bucharest was as good a place as any to share my mafia music with the KGB.

You learn to share fast in Communist countries and I was already sharing my room with Julie Meyers, an adventurous guy who had been on some Kruger National camping trips, so a few cockroaches and bugs weren't going to stand in the way of his fun behind the curtain. I refer to the 'Iron Curtain' because there were no shower curtains. The shower only worked if you pulled the toilet chain and the toilet only worked

We were greeted by a Romanian tennis delegation which looked more like a firing squad.

if you turned on the shower. So it was essential to have a roommate to coordinate things – one who didn't cherish his privacy. Otherwise you could be in a lot of trouble if you were caught sitting on that loo with no one manning the shower... The light bulbs were another story – they hissed at you just like a boomsquad every time you switched them on.

"Julie," I announced, standing on top of the toilet seat and examining a very suspicious looking light, "This place is definitely riddled with bugs."

"You don't have to tell me that, Abie, I've already knocked off two cockroaches this morning."

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean bugged, as in the buggers are listening to us."

But Julie wasn't convinced: "What could they possibly hope to gain? We've as good as beaten the Romanian team and knowing our team tactics won't make much of a difference."

"Well I'm playing Tiriac tomorrow and they tell me he belongs to



FRENCH OPEN FINAL Abe and partner Gordon Forbes (right) lost the doubles final to Roy Emerson and Manuel Santana in 1963.

the secret police!" I hissed back at the light bulb.

It was no coincidence that after he retired from playing tennis, Ion Tiriac was the first coach to use a secret sign language from the side of the court to coach his protégé, Guillermo Vilas, in the middle of a match. Tiriac was also the first coach to arrange big contracts for his players with clothing and racquet firms, revolutionising the game. Twelve months later, most of the top 10 players started travelling with

bugged. He in turn mentioned it to the British Consul General when the team was invited to the British Embassy for drinks one night. But the 'General' took it with a pinch of salt and his vodka martini: "In Bucharest every foreigner is considered to be a social experiment and therefore you can expect to be monitored." But for me, being a 'social experiment' was one step away from sticking one's head in a gas chamber.

their coaches in their pockets – with these same coaches lining their own pockets. Leave it to a Romanian to start a revolution without me in his back pocket.

I was able to prove my point to Meyers the very next day. I had complained directly to the 'light bulb' about the blankets: "These bloody blankets scratch like hell – they must be made from horse's hair! They've most probably eaten their sheep supplies. Did you notice any mutton chops on the menu?" Julie however said he didn't mind the rough blankets. And when we returned to our hotel after our matches, there lying on my bed were two completely different, slightly less itchy blankets. Yet the same 'horses hair' ones were still neatly folded on his.

"Now do you see what I mean?" I nodded in the direction of the light bulb. He nodded back and from then on we played 'Strangers in the Night' at full blast as we turned the lights on, just to give the KGB boys a headache. And somewhere in a safer 'safe house' in Maryland, America, Yuri Rastvorov was also busy giving the KGB a headache while CIA debriefers plumed him day after day for Russian Cold War intelligence.

I warned Claude about our rooms being

I insisted in telling a trusted South African one-armed reporter who was following the team's progress about these bugs in our rooms. He wasn't too convinced either, until I dragged him up to our room by his one arm to examine the lights: "See here," I showed him. "Unscrew that little lot and tell me what you think."

Unfortunately he boasted a few screws of his own in his good arm. Because when he reached out to touch the bulb he got thrown halfway across the room. "Shit!" I thought to myself. "He's got struck by that bug bolt. Now not only is he going to have his other arm missing, but he might also have a few screws missing."

But they breed journalists tough in South Africa and he got up, shook his head, felt his arm and said: "You may have a point here, Segal." I think he wrote about it in his next article, though politics in sport was nothing new to the public back home. The local spies never arrested him and probably being a one-armed bandit made you less of a target for the KGB. They preferred people with two arms so that they could break both of them.

I took out what was bugging me on the tennis court. And I constantly remind Ile Nastase



YURI RASTVOROV as Marty Simons – the identity he assumed when he defected to the US.



HOBNOBBING IN HOLLYWOOD Segal met British-born actress Jean Simmons during the Pacific South West tournament in LA.

that when you have KGB agents disguised as bellboys and ballboys, putting bugs in and calling balls out – the chances are you will start growling and prowling around “like an animal”.

The English Under-21 soccer team was also in town that week and unlike the South African Davis Cup team, the Romanian squad had beaten them. Under the ‘intelligence microscope’ this made the English less of a target. Ironically it was the same English line-up that went on to win the World Cup for England – Alan Ball, Nobby Stiles and the rest of those talented boys. The coaching consensus seemed to be that a quick challenge behind the Iron Curtain added iron to one’s blood and hair to one’s head. We joined the English soccer players for a meal in some uninspiring restaurant off the main boulevard. Julie brought an attractive local woman along – someone he had met in a bar who wasn’t wearing a raincoat. Everyone was having a sporting time, especially the Romanian tennis delegation who had generously dished out some no-name-brand local beer that blew one’s head off after the first sip. “It’s probably from the petrol station down the road!” I told Julie’s girlfriend, who didn’t bother to reply because she couldn’t speak a word of English. They must have also killed their last sheep in our honour as there was suddenly mutton on the menu. So we had something to celebrate over and above our convincing Davis Cup win. The only things we had underestimated were our friendly bathroom bugs.

Julie had mentioned he was going to fetch a friend while I was yanking the toilet and he was under the shower. Halfway through the second

round of bogus beer, a raincoat brigade arrived and physically dragged Julie’s date right off her chair and right out of the restaurant. It was right out of a George Smiley movie and it happened before anyone could blink. And when we did, we pictured her in front of a firing squad. Had we been minus our blazers and minus Claude Lister to keep us in check, it would have been check mate. The combined Springbok and Union Jack forces would have put up a fight even against the KGB. But the ‘Raincoat Raiders’ were in no mood to be messed with and they still had our passports locked away. They simply threw us all out, closed down the restaurant and ate the roast lamb themselves: “That’s the problem with communists in coats – they behave like party animals at other people’s parties!” I yelled to Julie as we stood in the street still dazed.

We never did find out exactly what happened to Julie’s date and why she was arrested. Julie couldn’t shed any light on the matter and Rastvorov, who had been operating in the Moscow precinct beyond Bucharest, couldn’t shed any light on this peculiar incident either. It remained a Davis Cup state secret. And we remained vomiting in another Russian Illusion until it had touched down at Heathrow airport. At least now that Nastase has progressed from being a ball boy to being the Mayor of Bucharest and Tiriac, a member of the secret service and

ABE SEGAL

Born in Doornfontein on 23 October 1930 to Polish immigrant parents, Segal became South African tennis champion and No 1 in 1964, beating Gordon Forbes. He played at Wimbledon from 1964 to 1976, and won five SA Doubles Championships: four with Forbes and one with Eric Sturgess. He reached the French Open doubles finals twice (once with Forbes and once with Australian Bob Howe), and also won five international singles titles, including the Irish and German Opens. He made it to the Wimbledon doubles semifinals with his friend Gordon Forbes, and won seven European doubles titles, beating top seeds Nicole Pietrangeli and Orlando Sarola.

Romanian team we beat, now owns the Bank Of Bucharest – all the KGB guys have defected. They treat visiting international tennis teams with much more respect. I’m told even the plumbing has escaped political manoeuvres in the dark and you can go to the toilet in peace.

It’s amazing what comes out in the wash when you talk at length to any tennis player who has origins in an Eastern Bloc country.



MEETING American actor Kirk Douglas at the Los Angeles Tennis Club.



COFFEE in the Wimbledon Players' Lounge with Peter Ustinov and Danish pro Torben Ulrich.

Through sheer force of habit there tends to be something to hide. Fred Kovaleski was ranked among the world's best players in the early 1950s. He reached the last 16 at the US National Championships at Forest Hills and at Wimbledon where he beat the 1952 Champion Frank Sedgman. We came from similar backgrounds: Fred grew up in a tough Polish suburb of Detroit called Hamtramck where his father worked on the production line of the Ford Motor Company. Unlike me, he received tennis coaching at a very young age from one of the best early coaches in America, Jean Hoxie. Jean was instrumental in securing Fred's tennis scholarship to William and Mary University where he became friendly with another American tennis player, Garner Anthony. They won the Inter-Collegian Tournament together and a hell of a lot of other tournaments around the world. I met both of them independently – Fred in South Africa when he worked for Pepsi Cola and Anthony through Dick Savitt at Wimbledon. Garner played the US Open and went on to manage some of the biggest television networks in America. Each of them are extraordinary individuals with adventurous personalities I could immediately relate to. And beyond tennis, they deserve to have their own books written about them, such has been their success in life.

The very month I was hitching a ride up the East Coast of Africa with a bunch of rough Italian sailors and almost getting shot by Arabs in Aden, Fred Kovaleski's English tennis pal, Arthur Charles, the Speaker of the House in Parliament, was assassinated. He was shot by the same revolutionaries in Aden, fighting for their independence from the British. This obviously occurred long before Fred and I met. Fred was a little older, having fought in an elite Parachute regiment of the 511th Airborne Division. Meanwhile I was parachuting my way out of poverty.

But the point is that tennis took us both to some very dangerous parts of the world. Although there was a king-size difference in the type of thing we got up to at these foreign destinations. While I was running away from Romanian hoodlums in raincoats and ducking bullets in Berlin, Fred was going on a tiger shoot in Madras with the Maharaja of Cochebehar, having tea with King Farouk of Egypt and sailing in King Paul of Greece's yacht. He attracted royalty and I attracted communists.

When Fred and I met in South Africa he was by then married to a Russian, Manya, whose family had fled Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution because her parents supported the Czar. I was married to Heather Nicholls, a Bermudan, whose parents had fled Scotland, not so much because of the Queen, but because of the bad weather. Fred was in charge of "Nabisco" and in charge of the first big Tennis Pro Am in America, the Dinah Shore Tournament in Palm Springs. It was a charity tennis and golf event loaded with swinging celebrities and sought-after champions – Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Burt Reynolds, Frankie Parker, Rod Laver, Ken Rosewall, Roy Emerson and Co. Coincidentally Telly Savalas was playing in the golf event the same year Fred invited me to play in the Tennis Round Robin. What none of us knew during all those years, least of all King Farouk and King Paul, was that our host – this Gary Cooper look-alike and charismatic tennis player, Fred – was one of America's top CIA agents.

Moreover, Fred Kovaleski was the agent who debriefed his KGB counterpart, Yuri Rastvorov, when Rastvorov, also a tennis player, defected to Washington under the name of 'Martin Simons'. These two sworn enemies, on opposite sides of the Cold War, subsequently became best friends as spies who loved tennis. It's what Burt Boyar should have been writing about in

his tennis novel, *World Class*. And the first time that America knew who "Martin Simons" really was, was in his *Washington Post* obituary when he died at the age of 84 in 2004, five days shy of the 50th anniversary of his defection...

I nearly died five days shy of my birthday when I discovered that my old friend Fred was a CIA agent. Manya, his wife, told me only a month ago over a dinner in New York. I was surprised by how many languages she can speak, and out of the blue she spilled the beans about Fred's undercover operations in Egypt and Beirut and all over the world. I spilled my minestrone beans in shock.

"Hell, Fred, I always knew you were an 'operator', but thank Christ it was Ray Moore and not you I took to meet Jack Sklar in Chicago! You would've locked me up in Alcatraz and thrown away the keys in Khartoum! And if I'd mentioned you as a relative in Romania – which I might've done 'cause your name ends in '-ski' – I could have been shot in the shower!"

The bottom line about to-ing and fro-ing under curtains and across walls is, you should think twice before allowing anyone with a drop-dead Russian-sounding name like Sharapova or Kournikova to enter your bathroom. You never know what she could be planting in your toilet or screwing under your shower...

And if you're invited to play in the Dinah Shore Pro Am, never boast to your host you've been to a Putin Summer Camp. It could be your last summer... **SI**



For more of Abe Segal's adventures on the 1950s and '60s tennis scene, pick up a copy of his new book, *Hey Big Boy*. It's available at all good booksellers for **R230**.