

Arturo Pomar Will Always Be *Arturito*: Media, Nationalism and Sports Celebrity in Francoist Spain¹

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Abstract: Arturo Pomar was five years old in 1936, when the Civil War began; eight when it ended; twelve when he drew in a three-day game against the then world chess champion, Alexander Alekhine; fifteen when a compilation of his best games and his first and unique biography during Francoism were published. The title of the biography uses the diminutive of his name, *Arturito*. *La vida de Arturito Pomar* (*The Life of Arturito Pomar*) responded to the popular demand for information about the child prodigy that started in 1943, when he first appeared in the NO-DO, the state-controlled series of cinema newsreels. According to his biographer, Jeroni Bergas, when he died in 2016, he was still *Arturito* in Spanish popular memory. Why and how Arturito Pomar never became Arturo are the questions that I ask in this text. I explain how the NO-DO and the written press produced Pomar as a celebrity representing Spanish exceptionalism. I also survey how the child-sportsman enabled the fiction of a national community through libidinal attachment. And finally, I attempt to interpret the political abandonment that Pomar suffered as an adult, despite his previous accolades and being the greatest chess player Spain ever had; someone that, without any economic or sport support, and overcoming bureaucratic and institutional obstacles, drew against Bobby Fischer in a tournament that had the Soviet players call Moscow to inquire about that excellent and unknown Spanish chess player.

Key words: Arturo Pomar, chess, media, Francoist celebrity, nationalism.

Resumen: Arturo Pomar tiene cinco años en 1936, al inicio de la Guerra Civil; ocho cuando termina; doce cuando hace tablas en una partida de tres días contra el entonces campeón del mundo de ajedrez, Alexander Alekhine; quince cuando

¹ Chess does not accrue the interest that soccer, basketball, or cycling enjoy in Spain. If cultural inquiry in sport's matters in the Hispanic world is scant per se, in chess is almost non-existent. To write this article I needed to recur to several people who helped me with insights, testimonies and documental support. I want to thank and acknowledge the contribution to this essay made by Carmen Romeo, Javier Asturiano, Eduardo Scala, Ricardo Lamarca, Mariano García Díez, Manuel Azuaga, Juan Carlos Sanz Menéndez and Carlos Varón.

se publica una compilación de sus mejores partidas y su primera y única biografía durante el franquismo, cuyo título utiliza el diminutivo de su nombre, Arturito. *La vida de Arturito Pomar* responde a la demanda popular de información sobre el niño prodigio que había comenzado en 1943, cuando apareció por primera vez en el NO-DO. Según su biógrafo, Jeroni Bergas, cuando muere en 2016, Arturo seguía siendo Arturito en la memoria popular española. Por qué y cómo Arturito Pomar nunca se convirtió en Arturo son las preguntas que planteo en este ensayo. Explico cómo el NO-DO y la prensa escrita produjeron a Pomar como una celebridad que representaba la excepcionalidad española. También examino cómo el niño-deportista habilitó la ficción de una comunidad nacional a través del apego libidinal. Finalmente, intento interpretar el abandono político que Pomar sufrió de adulto, a pesar de sus elogios anteriores y de ser el mejor jugador de ajedrez español de la historia; alguien que, sin apoyo económico o deportivo alguno, y superando obstáculos burocráticos e institucionales, entabló contra Bobby Fischer en un torneo en el cual los jugadores soviéticos llamaban a Moscú para recopilar información sobre aquel excelente y desconocido ajedrecista español.

Palabras clave: Arturo Pomar, ajedrez, medios de comunicación, celebridad franquista, nacionalismo.

Poor Spanish mailman. What a shame. You play so well and yet you'll have to return to Spain to the life of affixing stamps.

Bobby Fischer to Arturo Pomar, 1962.

Arturo Pomar was five years old in 1936, when the Civil War began; eight when it ended; twelve when he drew in a three-day game against the then world chess champion, Alexander Alekhine; fifteen when a compilation of his best games and his first and unique biography during Francoism were published. The title of the biography uses the diminutive of his name, Arturito. *La vida de Arturito Pomar* (*The Life of Arturito Pomar*) responded to the popular demand for information about the child prodigy that started in 1943, when he first appeared in the NO-DO, the state-controlled series of cinema newsreels. According to his biographer, Jeroni Bergas, when he died in 2016 at age eighty-one, he was still *Arturito* in Spanish popular memory (6).

Why and how Arturito Pomar never became Arturo are the questions that I ask in this text. I explain how the NO-DO and the written press produced Pomar as a celebrity representative of Spanish exceptionalism. I am also interested in how the child-sportsman enabled the fiction of a national community through libidinal attachment. And finally, I will explore the political abandonment that Pomar suffered when he grew

up, despite his previous accolades and his becoming the greatest chess player Spain had ever had, who without any economic or sport support drew against Bobby Fischer in a tournament that had the Soviet players call Moscow to inquire about that unknown Spanish man.

Pomar's political and ideological instrumentalization concerns three articulations: a) sports, popular culture, and mass media in the Spanish postwar era, since he was the first person iconized and endowed with the values that Francoism wished to disseminate;² b) the Francoist media and children, where Arturo's case is again the first of a list that would later include actors and singers such as Pablito Calvo, Joselito, Marisol, Pili and Mili, Rocío Dúrcal, Raphael or Ana Belén, among others; and c) sport and nationalism; again, here Pomar is the first in a list that would include, among others, the cyclist Federico Bahamontes, Real Madrid, and the boxer José Manuel Urtain, all constructed through mass media-elaborated libidinal attachment as personifications of state-held values.³

I. 1943-1946. *Arturito's Excellent Normality*

Francoism's *Weltgeschichte*, the regime's ideological explanation of history and worldly experience, rested on the exceptionalism of the Spanish race as chosen by God to be, as Francisco Franco stated, "the West's spiritual repository." As Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remind us, totalitarian narratives need an ideal type, a myth to be incarnated beyond its own constitutive sphere — the religious, in the Spanish case — that serves as a model enabling popular identification. The political and ideological myth constructed by totalitarian narratives

² For a bibliography of the theoretical works and the most representative case studies of this articulation, see Daniel Beck and Louis Bosshart; Alan Bairner, especially chapters one and eight. In the Hispanic world, both theoretical analyses and case studies are not as abundant as in the Anglo-Saxon, German and French traditions. Jorge Uría recently lamented the disinterest shown towards sport in the early years of the twentieth century, when it was already a mass phenomenon in Spain, as well as the lack of a research agenda on the popular culture associated with it (15).

³ There is a growing number of works on the relationship between sport and nationalism. Most transnational studies that focus on specific sports do so in football (see Liz Crolley and Vic Duke, and John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson). Another type of work emphasizes the type of society studied rather than the type of sport. A reference in this sense is Bairner and Sugden. There is a great variety of ways in which sport may be linked to nationalism. In this regard, Barnier writes that "the concept of" the national sport "is a slippery one. Most societies have their own peculiar traditions as regards sport and leisure activities.... The representation of the nation through sport can differ considerably from one nation to another" (166-167).

is bound up with the creation of popular belief, and the construction of a type: belief, since what makes “the myth true is the dreamer’s adhesion to his dream; a belief, a mythos, is only real when it has grasped the entire man;” and type, since “the nature and the finality of myth, or of the dream, is to incarnate itself in a figure. That is why myth and type are indissociable. For the type is the realization of the singular identity conveyed by the dream” (306).

Describing populism, José Luis Villacañas noted that it requires primarily the reduction and simplification of politics to mechanisms of imaginary identification that support communitarian desire, and that extend beyond the leader’s persona (65).⁴ From 1943 to 1946, during the first three years of the NO-DO — the audiovisual weapon of State propaganda — Pomar was constructed as an example, a mythical type to imitate. This populist construction was sustained by a dialectics between normality and heroism carefully exploited as a means of identification. As I will show, accounts of Pomar’s exceptionalism insisted on the boy’s normality to explain his abilities in relation to what he held in common with the audience, his being Spanish. Moreover, the control over the figure afforded by his existence, Pomar’s representational myth, was total: as it always happened with the NO-DO, in his multiple appearances we do not hear him but a background voice describing his activities, personality and thoughts; and, most importantly, the press accounts did not record his words. Pomar was the name of a myth — in the sense that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe understand the word — fully invested in Francoism’s narrative.

What first strikes the eye in Pomar’s story are the formal concomitances with that of the boxer José Manuel Urtain thirty years later. It is as if Pomar and Urtain, both practitioners of marginal sports damaged by their respective processes of glorification and abandonment, opened and closed a narrative of myth creation at the crossroads of sports, ideology, media, and politics. Drawing from academic sources and personal experiences, Juan A. Ríos Carratalá analyzed the media process that led Urtain to become a popular icon of “la España con dos cojones que salía de la pobreza y el catetismo a base de hostias” (“the Spain that, with two balls, came out of poverty and boorishness through blows;” 151) Ríos Carratalá reconstructs his shared experience with fellow teenagers in the 70s, summarizing it as a period in which

⁴ On Francoist relation between populism and media, especially in the NODO, see Araceli Rodríguez Mateos, especially pages 48-63. An overall account of Franco’s favoritism in Juan Pablo Fusi.

boys aspired to be told “estás hecho un Urtain” (“you have grown to be an Urtain;” 152). The boxer was then popular to the point of being a referent of the sentimental education of a generation, being the attachment to his figure such that when he won the European Championship, although some dissenting voices had alerted of a possible rigged match, they hardly had a popular echo because “ese día, primaba el entusiasmo de sabernos campeones, de lo que fuera” (“that day the enthusiasm of knowing that we were champions was what it was;” 153).

To reconstruct the popular influence of Pomar’s successes, we do not have many first-hand testimonies, so we need to recur to state-sponsored sources to understand what he meant for the Spanish postwar generation.⁵ Perhaps the strongest sign of his fame occurred during the soccer match between Real Madrid and Sporting of Gijón, on February 12th, 1946. That day, a full Chamartín stadium spontaneously chanted his name as he enthusiastically jumped to the center of the field to greet the crowd. Fifteen years later, the magazine *Triunfo* called that moment “la única vez en España que un ajedrecista se convertía en todo un ídolo popular” (“the only time in Spain that a chess player became an popular idol;” Cermeño 80).

Some of the few personal testimonies left are those of Román Torán and Francisco Umbral. Torán, chess champion of Spain in 1951 and 1953, and linked to the FEDA (Spanish Federation of Chess) since 1970 until his death in 2005 as member of the Board of Directors and president, recalls that the media appearances of Arturito Pomar introduced him and many others to the world of chess. Torán, fascinated by the child-

⁵ The key figure to understand the nationalization of Spanish sport in the first years of Francoism is the General Moscardó. On December 21st, 1938, the first issue of the sport daily *Marca* was published in San Sebastián. In this issue Moscardó anticipated what the national sports policy would look like once the Civil War came to an end: “Todo es función de Estado, nosotros nombraremos a los presidentes de la Federaciones, que, a su vez, por contar con nuestra absoluta confianza inspirarán los movimientos de aquellas en los procedimientos que se estimen más eficaces para el interés de la Patria y cuando haya una equivocación fundamental aquel señor dejará de ser grato y su sustitución será inapelable” (“Everything is a function of the State. We will appoint presidents of Federations which, in turn, by having our absolute confidence, will inspire their actions and the procedures that are considered most effective for the interest of the country. And if it were to be a fundamental mistake, the man in charge of the Federation will be no longer welcome, and his replacement will be final”). After the Civil War, Moscardó was appointed President of the Spanish Olympic Committee and the National Sports Council. In 1941, he was appointed first delegate of the newly created Delegación Nacional de Deportes (National Sports Delegation), an institution under the General Secretariat of the Movement, responsible for organizing and regulating all sports activity in the country.

prodigy, recalls that he was in first line when Pomar visited Gijón in the 1944 tournament organized by the local chess club.⁶ For his part, Umbral equates the “postwar generation” with “Arturito Pomar’s generation,” pointing towards the significance of the chess player in the 40s.

Los niños de la guerra somos de la generación de Arturito Pomar. Dimos un genio del ajedrez, ya que otras genialidades estaban mal vistas, incluso fusiladas. Una vez, Arturito Pomar (ahora me parece que trabaja en Correos) estuvo en Valladolid jugando unas simultáneas con los socios del casino y ajedrecistas locales. Yo, que no sabía nada de ajedrez, me metí allí, de pantalón corto y con las rodillas sucias, porque he experimentado siempre, como los judíos (y me parece que no tengo nada de judío, y lo siento), la fascinación por los grandes de la tierra. Arturito Pomar era un pequeño grande de la tierra quemada de la España de posguerra.

(“We children of the war are of the generation of Arturito Pomar. We gave a genius of chess, since other geniuses were unaccepted, and even shot. Once, Arturito Pomar [now it seems to me that he works in the Postal Service] was in Valladolid playing simultaneously with partners of the casino and local chess players. I, who did not know anything about chess, got in there in my shorts and dirty knees, because I have always experienced, like the Jews [and I do not think I have anything Jewish, and I am sorry about that], the fascination for the greatest of the land. Arturito Pomar was a little greatness of the burned soil of post-war Spain. 14).

Pomar’s multiple press appearances allow us to suppose that Umbral’s fascination was comparable to what other children experienced when

⁶ “Conocí los primeros pasos de Arturito cuando participó en el Campeonato de España de 1943. Yo, que apenas conocía el mate pastor, me convertí en hinch de Arturito y en primera fila me encontraba cuando se iniciaron las partidas del Torneo Internacional de Gijón, mi ciudad natal, en 1944. Muchos hemos sido los seguidores de Pomar, los que de un modo u otro llegamos apasionados al ajedrez, que experimentó un notable impulso para su desarrollo en España.” (I knew the first steps of Arturito when he participated in the Championship of Spain of 1943. I, who barely knew the Scholar’s checkmate, became a fan of Arturito and I was in the front row when the games began in the International Tournament of Gijón, my hometown, in 1944. Many of us have been the followers of Pomar, who in one way or another have become passionate about chess, who experienced a remarkable impetus for their development in Spain) I am grateful to Carmen Romeo, current chair of the FEDA History Commission, for providing me with the list of FEDA presidents reflected in the unpublished volume that Ricardo Álvarez Cela wrote to celebrate the federation’s 70th anniversary.

the child-prodigy and media sensation visited their towns, and offered exhibitions of simultaneous games. Arturito's popular successes fueled the organization of national chess tours that were advantageous for both, his humble family and the State. Although it is unlikely that they could have protested, Jesús Boyero writes that Pomar's parents understood that his son's talents and renown would help them escape the hardships of the postwar years, and accepted all proposed exhibitions, disregarding the harm they could cause in the boy's health. For its part, the Francoist regime exploited the chess prodigy for populist and ideological purposes.

"Exploited" is not a randomly chosen word. Pomar toured Spain uninterruptedly in events organized and financially backed by the DND (Delegación Nacional de Deportes, National Delegation of Sports), an institution politically and ideologically aligned with the *Movimiento* (Fascist movement) that controlled all aspects of sports organization and activities.⁷ At age twelve he began offering exhibitions in local chess clubs, visiting sick children, participating in tournaments at regional and national levels, and meeting with State authorities in private events. To understand Pomar's mobility and intense activity around the peninsula during this three-year period, we can recreate his travels after the Gijón tournament mentioned by Torán. After the tournament he disputed simultaneous games that were reported in the press and the NO-DO recurrently. He offered two exhibition games in Madrid and six in Barcelona, with a total result of forty-six victories, twelve draws and four defeats. Afterwards, he played two friendly games against the champion of Spain, Antonio Medina ("Arturito Pomar, el prodigioso" 1). At his return to Palma de Mallorca, where he lived, he played simultaneously against twelve players in the Passatge Bar, winning eleven games and drawing one. Later, he went to the Club Ajedrez Mallorca, where he played a double session. On July 2nd he simultaneously faced twelve students from the Santa Catalina National Graduate School of Children. Days later, he moved to La Salle College, where he played another session of simultaneous games against a group of twelve teachers and students, winning all. July 15th he traveled to A Coruña stopping by Barcelona and Madrid, where he played exhibition games the 24th and the 25th. In A Coruña, after the session of simultaneous games, he played against the regional champion,

⁷ For a detailed account of the organization of sportive activities in the postwar years, see Carles Santacana. On the relations between the Falange and the DND, see Duncan Shaw.

Venancio Carro (Bergas 42). Then he traveled to Santander, where the Montañés Chess Club organized another simultaneous exhibition game for the boy (“Ajedrez”). It is then that, “si no lo requieren de otras ciudades del norte” (“if he is not required by other northern cities;” “Ajedrez”), Pomar returns to Mallorca to prepare for the Madrid International tournament, which featured players such as Paul Keres, Friedrich Sämisch, and Alfred Brinckmann. In this tournament his game with Brinckmann ended in a draw after two days and two hours. Days later, he won against Agustín Ingelmo — then Spanish national champion — and the audience carried him out of Círculo de Bellas Artes on their shoulders (“El torneo final” 1) On his way back home, he stopped in Barcelona to play a friendly game against Pedro Moner, and inaugurate the Chess Club *Arturito Pomar*.

After the Madrid tournament, Pomar’s fame was international. At age 13, he received offers to play in Argentina and the United States, which the regime preferred not to accept in the name of national commitments (“Ajedrez”). Indeed, the frenzy to exhibit the kid in the peninsula continued at least for a year until September 25th, 1945, when the government, concerned about Pomar’s physical and mental conditions, decided to submit him to a psycho-technical analysis (“Un nuevo éxito;” “En la sección deportiva”). All his chess activity was stopped “hasta que se fijen por la Delegación Nacional de Deportes los términos de su futura actuación” (“until the terms of his future performances are decided by the National Sports Delegation;” “Arturito Pomar no participará”). Two months later, he received authorization to participate in a tournament organized by Real Madrid (“Noticiario breve”) and, four months later, in February 1946, the newspaper ABC made public the results of the psychiatric exam while Pomar was in London playing an international tournament (“El resultado”). In London, Arturito was astonished by the amount of bread he could eat — that is, amazed at a country without *cartillas de racionamiento*, rations, and famine. Upon his return, he won his first championship of Spain at age 15. His London successes paired with the newly won national title were too attractive for propaganda to let them pass without profiting. It is for this reason that he was received by Francisco Franco in the governmental Palacio del Prado (fig. 1), before his national tours of simultaneous games began again, followed by written and audiovisual accounts (Díez 5).



Fig. 1. Arturo Pomar and Francisco Franco at the Palacio del Prado.⁸

The Spanish media and propaganda touted every Pomar event. Already in April 1943, when the child-prodigy phenomenon hatched at the national level largely due to his first appearance in the NO-DO on February 19th and his participation in the Championship of Spain representing the Balearic Islands at age 11, the Asturias newspaper *Pensamiento Alavés* pointed out the “excesiva curiosidad por ver al niño prodigio Arturito Pomar” (“excessive curiosity to see the prodigy Arturito Pomar;” “El precoz Arturito”). A few days later, López Esnaola, a chess player from Avilés defeated by Pomar during the championship, confirmed that “con el niño Arturito Pomar se han llenado muchas páginas en casi todos los periódicos españoles.” (“Many pages have been filled with Arturito Pomar in almost every Spanish newspaper”). In addition to his multiple appearances in the local press, trend magazines such as *Semana* featured him on the cover as the “campeón

⁸ Reproduced in *Peón de Rey*, vol. 6, 2002, p. 50.

de ajedrez más joven del mundo” (“the youngest chess champion in the world”). The NO-DO and sport specialized journals such as *Marca* and *Mundo Deportivo* routinely reported his activities. In 1943 Pomar appeared nine days on *ABC* and six on *La Vanguardia*; in 1944, twenty days on *ABC* and three on *La Vanguardia*; in 1945, twenty-nine days on *ABC* and eleven days on *La Vanguardia*; and in 1946, ninety-one days on *ABC* and nineteen on *La Vanguardia*. From 1947 onwards, his popularity declined. That year, his name appeared on *ABC* fourteen days, and none in *La Vanguardia*. In 1948, none of the newspapers mentioned him.

The following *ABC* excerpt succinctly illustrates Pomar’s ability to attract and congregate masses. Fallaciously linking the number of chess players with the number of spectators fascinated by the kid, the headline states that “Pomar alcanza el límite de la popularidad” (“Pomar reaches the limit of popularity”). In this account of a twelve-year-old Pomar (the text wrongly ascribes him thirteen), de Agustín shows his amazement at the child’s power to mobilize a whole town.

Arturo Pomar está alcanzado con su fama los extremos de la lógica. Recientemente, en la prensa española, se dio la noticia de una actuación del niño ajedrecista, en un pueblo norteño español. Con el laconismo peculiar en estas informaciones se decía: quede afirmarse que, prácticamente, acudió a presenciar la exhibición todo el pueblo. El caso, analizándolo, resulta paradójico. En España existen 20.000 ajedrecistas. Admitiendo la existencia de otra cantidad semejante sin organizar. Por lo tanto, no pasan de 100.000 entre ajedrecistas y los que saben jugar ajedrez (que no es lo mismo). Estas cifras se aglomeran, mayormente, en las principales ciudades. Sin que el optimismo nos ciegue sabemos que no pasan de las 100 las personas por cada 10.000 habitantes las que saben algo de ajedrez, pero eso no ha sido obstáculo para TODO UN PUEBLO [mayúsculas en el original], asista a presenciar una actuación del ajedrecista balear. El milagro ha podido realizarse gracias a dos cosas. Los trece años del ajedrecista y la cooperación de los medios de difusión y propaganda que en España no han regateado los más grandes elogios al niño.

(“Arturo Pomar’s fame is reaching the limits of logic. Recently, the Spanish press reported the news of a performance of the chess-child in a Spanish northern town. With the peculiar laconism of this sort of information, the account read: it should be said that, practically, the whole town attended the exhibition. The case is paradoxical. There are 20,000 chess players in Spain, and we can admit the existence of another similar quantity not registered in any club. Therefore, there

are no more than 100,000 people if we add up chess players and those who know how to play chess (which is not the same). These players are mostly concentrated in the main cities. That is, without letting optimism blind us, we know that no more than 100 people per 10,000 inhabitants know some chess, but that wasn't an obstacle for A WHOLE TOWN [capital letters in the original], to attend a performance of the Balearic chess player. The miracle was accomplished thanks to two things: the thirteen years of age of the chess player, and the cooperation of the media and propaganda in Spain, which did not spare the highest praise of the child).

Legitimizing his abilities as a product of what he shared with the rest of Spaniards, the NO-DO and other newspapers linked Arturito's excellency to his nationality. According to the common narrative, his extraordinary skills reflected the glorious Spanish national character. Consider, for example, this ABC excerpt that connects Arturito's gift with the historic and characteristic Iberian fury: "Arturito Pomar, ese muchachito moreno, de cuño español, en cuyos ojos, entornados por la meditación del juego, se vislumbra la furia ibérica y que ofrece en su aire colegial un arquetipo de la Adolescencia acrisolada" ("Arturito Pomar, that little dark haired boy, of a Spanish mark, in whose eyes, half-closed because of thinking the game, the Iberian fury is discernible, offering in its collegial air an archetype of impeccable Adolescence;" de Castro). Or consider this NO-DO description, in which Pomar is portrayed as "un niño normal, como los demás, que adquiere con entusiasmo la prensa infantil que corresponde a su edad" ("a kid like others, who enthusiastically acquires the press that corresponds to his age"), while showing images of him playing with other kids, and riding a bicycle. The insistence on Pomar's normality rhetorically centers the myth he enables around his relatability. In *La Vanguardia*, Pombo Angulo points out that he is "un buen chico que no es el primero de la clase, y que incluso se muerde las uñas" ("a nice kid who is not the best of his class, and who even bites his nails"), someone who "es verdad que domina la técnica del ajedrez, pero igual lo suspenden en Gramática Latina" ("it is true that dominates the technique of chess, but he may fail Latin grammar;" 13).

The local press followed this scheme. The Zamoran *Imperio*, taking advantage of his presence in the city to dispute an exhibition of simultaneous games, shows surprise at the kid being a kid: "Arturito Pomar es un chico en toda la extensión de la palabra. Seguramente ya se habrán formado una idea de él a través de las fotografías publicadas

en los periódicos. Pero cuando vean al campeón pasearse por la ciudad van a impresionarse un poco: porque el Campeón de España, aunque solo cuenta en la actualidad con 14 años, representa poco más de 10.” (“Arturito Pomar is a boy in all the extension of the word. Surely, all of you will have already formed an idea of him through the pictures published in the newspapers. But when you see the champion strolling around the city today, you are going to be a little bit surprised: because the Spanish Champion, although currently is only 14, represents little more than 10; “Con Arturito Pomar”).

The 1946 London tournament consecrated Pomar. For the *New York Times*, “Arturo has been the center of attraction during the tournament. He drew two games against 53-year-old world champion Alexander Alekhine and the thick ring of spectators around his chair had no noticeable effect on his play,” continuing to add that “no young people of Arturo Pomar’s caliber have been found in recent years” (Vosser 14). For the *Washington Post*, “he is the number 1 box-office attraction.” In its account, the *Post* emphasizes that the salary of Juan Pomar, father of Arturito and employed in the service of Aviation, is “less than a thousand pesetas, around 110 dollars per month” (“Chess expert” 12). For the *News Chronicle*, Pomar’s presence in London diverted attention from the United Nations Conference being held to heal the wounds of World War II (Vicky). This phenomenon is illustrated in figure 1, where three men representing political power and nationalism — two of the key issues on the First UN General Assembly — face Pomar over a world map chessboard. Upon Pomar’s return, most Spanish newspapers dedicated the cover image to the official reception welcoming the national sensation. In addition to officials, *La Vanguardia* reported that a huge crowd awaited Arturito, so when the door of the plane opened and the boy from Mallorca appeared, he was greeted with a standing ovation. (“Arturito Pomar fue recibido triunfalmente”). According to *Hoja oficial de los lunes*, two days later, word of mouth had it that Arturo was present in the Chamartín stadium to watch his soccer idols, and caused a spontaneous chant of his name. During half-time, Pomar “correspondió desde el centro del campo de Chamartín a las clamorosas ovaciones de homenaje con que fue acogida su presencia” (“responded from the center of the Chamartín stadium to the clamorous ovations of homage with which he was greeted” (“Homenaje espontáneo” 1).

Pomar becoming the image of Spain abroad, a central issue for the DND was to sell Pomar’s international successes as their own.

As Carles Santacana explains, the lack of relevant accomplishments in international scenarios had a double component: on one hand, it certified the low level of national competitors; on the other, it added a political frustration to the dictatorship's battle for international recognition (229).

II. 1962. *The Abandonment of the Hero*

Between 1946 and 1962, Pomar won several national championships, played tournaments in Latin America, United States and Canada, invited by clubs and individuals. He got married, had children, and started to work in a post office in a State-granted job. Ricardo Lamarca, a friend that competed against him several times, emphasizes this fact along with the donation of a house to defend that the regime supported enough Pomar's activities. In an unpublished handwritten manuscript, Lamarca argues that "fue Arturito y luego Arturo muy protegido y famoso entre los famosos, ídolo de años de estrecheces [...] [El gobierno lo apoyó con] traslado familiar a Madrid, casa (escasas en la época), entrada en Correos, gratificación de la FEDA, etc." ("it was Arturito, and then Arturo, very protected and famous among the celebrities, idol of difficult years [...] [The government supported him with] a family move to Madrid, house (scant at that time), a FEDA gratification, etc.).⁹ Others such as Eduard Pomar, Leontxo García, Jesús Boyero, and Pepo Viñas denounced the regime's attitude towards Pomar once he was no longer a child, emphasizing the government's failure to support him during the Stockholm Interzonal Tournament of 1962.

At a time when chess was considered a key cultural and political element concerning international relations, a selection of the best world players, including Bobby Fischer, Tigran Petrosian, Viktor Kortschnoi, Efim Geller and Lajos Portisch, reunited in Sweden with the goal of classifying for the World Championship. During the Cold War, chess players competed for primacy on the chessboard, and media reports assumed a simple equivalence: the country that had the best player was also in possession of intellectual supremacy, which exponentially increased its prestige. A nation's prestige was vital for many reasons, but fundamentally because it fostered a favorable consideration by other nations, predisposing them to the eventuality of a leadership. Moreover, it encouraged emulation in a scenario where imitation of a system of government guaranteed the political and economic stability

⁹ I thank Javier Asturiano for e-mailing me a scan of Ricardo Lamarca's text "Pomar: su época y ayudas."

of the central power. Given the cultural and political connotations of chess at this period, we can understand the amount of publicity and coverage the match between the American Bobby Fischer and the Soviet Boris Spassky had, brilliantly narrated in George Steiner's *Fields of Force*. It is also understandable that the U.R.S.S. spared no expenses to maintain its leadership in the chess universe. In a period when chess channeled national libidinal attachment, players represented the body of a nation, which rejoiced and suffered with them and/or for them; especially in the U.R.S.S, they were national icons for whom large teams of people worked, with a dedication comparable to that applied to the development of aerospace technology.¹⁰

Pomar traveled to Sweden accompanied by his mother and a small book of endgames for amateurs. He did not have a team with him — trainers and analysts that worked overnight to recommend the best moves the following day in postponed matches. Moreover, far from receiving support, as it had been the case during his infancy, Pomar — son of a working-class family, mailman, and father of seven — had to cover all his expenses during the month-long unpaid leave granted by the government. Additionally, in order to travel, her wife Carmen had to spend family savings, part of which were dedicated to buying a gift for the employee that substituted Pomar while he competed. When Torán stood up for Pomar and complained about the situation to the authorities, he was sanctioned (Bergas 114).

Despite the obstacles, during the first eleven games Pomar ranked top five. His victory against Geller — who finished the tournament in second place —, and his draw in a two-day game with Fischer — who won the tournament — had the Soviet players call Moscow, and gather information about him. In the second half of the tournament, Pomar began losing and conceding draws in favorable positions due to the sleep deprivation caused by his lack of a team. While other players had trainers and analysts working overnight on postponed matches, Pomar had to do the job himself, and came back to the chess room the following day without having slept (“El cartero genial”). Pomar finished the tournament at eleventh position, half a point short of qualifying for the World Championship. Although we do not have data of his overall training for this tournament, we know that six months later, when he received the title of Grand Master, he said in an interview that “tengo muchísimo trabajo. Imagínate que solo puedo dedicar al ajedrez tres horas a la semana” (“I have tons of work. I can only dedicate three

¹⁰ For the impact of chess during the Cold War, see Daniel Johnson.

hours a week to chess;" Interview with Cermeño). When he returned to Spain, the first symptoms of the mental illness that would accompany him until his death in 2016 appeared.

Details about his condition are unknown. His son Eduard was not able to offer a specific diagnosis. It was referred to as an illness that involved memory loss and permanent fatigue, as it is reported February 15th, 1966, in an *ABC* article that reads "el campeón de ajedrez, Arturo Pomar, ha sido internado en el Instituto Frenopático de Barcelona por agotamiento y pérdida de memoria circunstancial;" ("the chess champion, Arturo Pomar, has been hospitalized in the Barcelona clinic for fatigue and circumstantial memory loss; "Arturo Pomar: agotamiento"). Between the opinions held by Lamarca — for whom Pomar's illness and the Stockholm tournament are two disconnected phenomena — and García, Boyero, his son Eduard, Bergas, and Viñas — for whom Pomar's illness was caused, partly or entirely, by the effort that supposed the Stockholm Interzonal and his previous exploitation —, Antonio López Manzano and Joan Segura Vila emphasize Pomar's "genetical predisposition" to develop a condition consisting on an "excess of tranquility" (341-42).

Pomar was interviewed about his childhood and process of media iconification in 1992. He appeared laconic, apathetic, indifferent and phlegmatic. After spoken reluctantly about a tribute that the president of the Balearic Islands conceded him days before, the journalist Llorenç Capellà asked Pomar if he cared about things. "What things?," answered Pomar. "Those that happen every day," replied Capellà. "No, absolutely not. I do not care about anything at all," the player concluded ("Arturito Pomar, ecos" 32). Regarding his political instrumentalization and subsequent abandonment, he sounded resigned and submissive. After remembering that in 1962 he was awarded the title of Grand Master — the first time the International Chess Federation (FIDE) distinguished a Spaniard with that credential —, Capellà asked Pomar if he thought that the Postal Service was the right place to develop his talent.

— Pomar.— Impartir classes se me va proposar. Es deia que ensenyaria a les escoles. Inclòs un ministre, anomenat Rubio, em va sondejar per veure si estava disposat a fer-me'n càrrec de l'organització. Després tot es va quedar en paraules.

— Capellà.— Li va saber greu?

— No. Volem que ensenyi escacs? D'acord. Prefereixen que no ho faci? D'acord. No es cosa meva decidir-ho.

— Cosa seva deuen ser els seus somnis.

- ¿Quins somnis?
- Els que té. O no té somnis?
- No. Que faria amb ells?
-
- Què sentia davant una derrota, ràbia o resignació?
- Resignació, sempre resignació. Qualsevol contratemps, en aquesta vida, s'ha d'agafar amb resignació.
- Doncs, jo l'agafo com a tal. Però, a canvi de resignació, satisfaci la meva curiositat. A què ve aquest afany per perdre'm de vista?
- No el tinc.
- Se li nota.
- A mi tant em dona parlar com quedar-me mut. El que passa és que d'aquí a una estona tinc que anar a la feina. Classifico correspondència. I m'entreten. No pot imaginar-se com m'entreten.
- (“Pomar.— They proposed to me that I teach. They wanted me to teach chess in schools. Even a minister, named Rubio, approached me to see if I was willing to take responsibility for the organization. But they were just words.
- Capellà.— Did you feel bad?
- No. Do you want me to teach? I agree. Do you prefer me not to teach? I agree. It is not my business to decide what I do.
- Your dreams may be your business.
- What dreams?
- The ones you have.
- No. What would I do with them?
- ...
- What did you feel after a defeat, rage or resignation?
- Resignation, always resignation. You have to accept with resignation every mishap of life.
- I accept it. But, in exchange of resignation, please satisfy my curiosity. Why do you want me to go?
- I don't.
- It's clear.
- It does not matter to me to speak or to stay mute. What happens is that I am going to work in an hour. I classify mail. That entertains me. You can't imagine how much it entertains me.”)

García and Bergas asked why, later in life, Pomar did not denounced the Francoist attitude towards him as did his son, his biographer, his friends, and journalists such as Boyero or Leontxo García (“El cartero genial,” *Artur* 173). This question could be answered referring to his apathetic, disinterested and laconic personality, which supposedly disposed him to avoid conflict and confrontation. However, a political dimension

explaining his attitude must be added. In my view, Pomar never considered that his illness had a bio-political root, nor did he see himself as a populist tool, because he had fully internalized a separation between existence and desire. Having grown up in a postwar Spain financed, publicized and constructed as a governmental object, he did not believe that his life belonged to him but to the State. In Lacanian terms, Pomar's *jouissance* seemed to consist in his total abandonment to the symbolic mandate of the government, which stood for the Big Other. For this reason, his public affirmation that it was not his business to decide what to do with his life could be understood as a sincere utterance. Consequently, the question is not why Pomar never complained about the treatment he received when he was no longer a child politically exploitable, but how could he have complained from this ideological standpoint.

One could argue that three factors determined the regime's attitude towards Pomar in his adulthood: a) chess did not have the level of popularity that other sports enjoyed; b) the child prodigy became an adult, losing his Circensian appeal to mobilize the masses; and c) the empty scene of international sports successes of the 40s had somewhat filled. Between the 1946 London tournament and the 1962 Stockholm Chess Interzonal, several Spanish athletes gained worldwide renown: the cyclists Guillem Timoner and Federico Bahamontes, the gymnast Joaquín Blume and, above all, the soccer team Real Madrid. The importance of Real Madrid's undisputed dominance in the first five European Cups was underlined by Jose Solís, ministry-secretary of the Fe de las JONS — the union of Falange Española and Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional, the only political party allowed in Spain — who encapsulated what international successes meant politically for the country's international relations:

Vosotros habéis hecho mucho más que muchas embajadas desperdigadas por esos pueblos de Dios. Gente que nos odiaba ahora nos comprende gracias a vosotros, porque rompisteis muchas murallas [...] Vuestras victorias constituyen un legítimo orgullo para todos los españoles, dentro y fuera de nuestra patria. Cuando os retiráis a los vestuarios, al final de cada encuentro, sabed que todos los españoles están con vosotros y os acompañan, orgullosos de vuestros triunfos, que tan alto dejan el pabellón español.

("You have done much more than many embassies scattered around the globe. People who hated us now understand us thanks to you, because you broke many walls [...] Your victories are a legitimate pride for all Spaniards, inside and outside our country. When you retire

to the changing rooms, at the end of each match, know that all the Spaniards are with you and accompany you, proud of your triumphs that leave the Spanish pavilion so high" [*Boletín* 112.])

Being of no use propagandistically, Pomar was abandoned by Francoism when he needed it most. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, his is a case that retains morphological concomitances with that of the boxer Urtain. For example, if in the 70s, "el deporte español andaba huérfano de figuras" ("Spanish sports did not have any celebrities;" Ríos Carratalá 154), in the 40s, before the arrival of Bahamontes and the international outpouring of Real Madrid, Pomar was "uno de los pocos nombres que el regimen de Franco podía vender en el exterior" ("one of the few names that the Franco regime could sell abroad;" Ochoa 1). Also, two books were published in 1946 to mark the ascent of Pomar's popularity while the years immediately preceding and succeeding Urtain's victory in the European Championship two books, a movie, and a summer song ("Urtain, Knockout y Olé") emerged. Pomar and Urtain, are ultimately figures of defeat: one ended up with an unknown mental illness that affected him also physically, and the other committed suicide days before the opening of the Barcelona Olympic Games that marked the entrance of Spain into global modernity. They were both figures of defeat who, for a short period of time, mediated national hope for international recognition.

The poet Eduardo Scala interviewed Pomar when the player turned 60 years old. He recalled the words of Alexander Kotov, one of the main trainers of the U.R.S.S. National Chess Team during the Cold War, who affirmed that if Pomar had been born in the Soviet Union, he would have been a World Championship contender. The description of Scala's arrival to the interview encapsulates the tension that defined Pomar's adult life: his brilliance as chess player, and his State-granted mediocrity as mailman in charge of classifying correspondence. In *El Juzgador de Ajedrez*, Scala writes:

Llueve. Arturito Pomar ya tiene sesenta años, y a las dos de la tarde me espera. Peregrino hacia el gran maestro, la leyenda española del ajedrez, a través de Las Ramblas. Preparo el momento en un antiguo Café. Bebo, libo devocionalmente una copa de Hierbas de Mallorca: Felanitx, la vieja casa del Dr. Ticoulat, la Plaça de la Palla de Palma, la butaca de terciopelo rojo del salón de actos del Instituto Nacional de Previsión, entre Cibeles y la Puerta de Alcalá (cuando nuestro héroe, junto a Gligoric y Portisch, me introdujo en el maravilloso ajedrez),

pulsan el corazón de mi memoria. Estoy en la oficina central de Correos de Barcelona.

— *¿Don Arturo Pomar?*

— Tiene usted que dar la vuelta. Entre por el otro lado del edificio. Pomar está detrás, en el muelle de la Oficina de Cambios.

El Gran Maestro me aguarda en el centro de la larga galería que va a dar a su departamento, situado en la enorme nave. Se trata de un lugar desolador, de atmósfera kafkiana, procesual. Me ofrece su mano de caballero, distante, lánguida. Tiene en su mesa una torre de sobres que debe introducir en sus casillas correspondientes. Me invita amablemente a sentarme en su taburete de trabajo; él prefiere permanecer de pie, como si fuese a jugar una partida simultánea conmigo. Me observa desde la ausencia, flotante. Parece gozar de quietud de espíritu; sin embargo, enciende un cigarrillo tras otro, mientras me mira atentamente con su mejor ojo. Es Job —el Job del final del Libro—; se lo digo; él lo sabe. Comenzamos el juego.

(“It is raining. Arturito Pomar is already sixty, and at two o’clock he is waiting for me. I pilgrim through Las Ramblas towards the great master, the Spanish legend of chess. I prepare the moment in an old cafeteria. I drink, I devotionally imbibe a cup of Majorcan herbs: Felanitx, the old house of Dr. Ticoulat, Palla de Palma square, the red velvet armchair of the auditorium of the Instituto Nacional de Previsión, between Cibeles and Puerta de Alcalá [where our hero, along with Gligoric and Portisch, introduced me to the marvelous sport of chess], pulsate the heart of my memory. I am at the central office of the Postal Service in Barcelona.

— “Mr. Arturo Pomar?”

— You need to turn around. Enter through the other side of the building. Pomar is behind, on the dock of the Exchange Office.

The Grand Master is waiting for me in the middle of the long gallery located in the enormous warehouse that leads into his office. It is a desolate place, with a Kafkaesque, procedural atmosphere. He offers me his distant, languid hand. Over his table lies a tower of envelopes that must enter into their corresponding boxes. He kindly invites me to sit on his work stool; he prefers to stand, as if he was playing a simultaneous game with me. He looks at me from the absence, floating. He seems to enjoy a certain stillness of spirit; however, he lights one cigarette after another, while he looks at me with his best eye. He is Job — the Job at the end of the Book; I tell him; he knows. We start the game; 25).”

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