



# Helen Sobel Smith

de sterkste bridge-speelster aller tijden

Helen wins her last title in 1968: the mixed team championship. The teammates were Jacoby, Oswald and Jim, and Minda Brackman. About this victory, Oswald Jacoby will say: "Helen was so sensational. She won it. We were just her teammates". A year later Helen Sobel, 59 yo, died by cancer in Detroit. Today, she's regarded as the stronger woman of all times.



Helen Smith was born in Philadelphia in 1910. She had four husbands, the second of which was Alexander Sobel, a world class bridge player; that is why we call her Helen Sobel.

Helen was a beautiful woman: she worked for a variety show and she also made an appearance in the Marx Brothers' film 'Animal Crackers', in 1930. In this period, she learned bridge from another chorus girl. Helen never played with her bridgeplayer husband: she was too strong for him.

In 1937, Ely Culbertson called her for playing in the team which had to compete the world championship in Hungary. She teamed up with Paul Vogelhofer, a young man less strong than he looked like. Track of Vogelhofer was lost after 1937, he's no longer even in the Official Encyclopedia. The 1937 American team was the leading one, but its strength, apart from Vogelhofer, was mined by Culbertson's crisis, a crisis in playing as well in the marriage. Ely and Josephine divorced a few months later. Despite these limits the Americans managed to run the playoff against Austria but there was their road's end. Probably, the Austrians were less strong individually but they had an higher bidding system.

By the forties, Helen won everything in the USA; her partner was the number one: Charles Goren. True to tell, Oswald Jacoby was stronger than Goren, but he played seldom because when USA went to war he gave everything up volunteers to army.

In 1957 Helen again took the field for the world championship, now it is called "Bermuda Bowl". The Americans present just one fixed couple which was Ogust-Koytchou and four players which will play according to their mood. The others were Goren, Seamon, Leventritt. Italy will win.

In their book "Bermuda Bowl" (1999 Five Aces Bookks, UK), Brian Senior and Henry Francis indicate two main reasons of the defeat. Namely, they were the lack of fixed partnerships and the superiority of Italian bidding systems: the Neapolitan Club and the Roman Club. For the second time Helen is only runner up for reasons not depending by her. Admittedly, none could defeat that Italian team. They were: Pietro Forquet with Guglielmo Siniscalco; Eugenio Chiaradia with Mimmo D'Alelio; Giorgio Belladonna with Walter Avarelli. These names have been the starters of the "Italian dynasty", so called by Senior and Francis.

After 1957 Helen still plays and wins, but she will never enter again in the Bermuda Bowl team, also because the partnership with Goren crashed. In Richard Powell's novel "Tickets to the Devil", Helen and Charlie are recognizable as Carol and Ace; in the fiction, they felt out because an unlucky lead by a stiff king. Some years later, they meet again in the Spring Nationals: she's now a famous champion, he's walking on sunset boulevard. Carol, who still loves him, shall offer herself as bridge partner for renew his glory times.

**The book:** Winning bridge, by Helen Sobel. 1950 Peter Davies editor, London. 253 pagg.

Helen Sobel enters the bridge playing in the eyes of a child that enters a new world. From chapter one: "I discover the end play":

"I think that bridge really got into my blood a certain day in the thirties when a world-shattering incident occurred:

I was declarer in a six-spade contract, doubled my right hand opponent. He had actually turned up with the QJ10 of trumps - I had cashed the ace and king - and I was disconsolately sure that he would turn up with the king of hearts, over dummy's ace-queen.

Simply to delay the awful end as long as possible, I gathered in my tricks in diamonds and clubs; then (hoping my partner would not be too disagreeable about my slam bid), I was just about to take the necessary heart finesse when the Vision Appeared!

I led a trump. East was "in", and his forced heart return, to dummy's tenace, made me tingle with delight and self-appreciation.

That, so far I was concerned, was the Birth of the End Play (perhaps it's needless to say I hadn't been playing bridge very long). My chagrin and deflation can be imagined when I discovered, a few days later, that the end play was the standard equipment for even semi-experts..."

The child grows and become a woman provided of great technique and subtle psychology. On chapter 18, "How to foul your partner", she treats about deceptive defence:

	K942	
873		Q105
	AJ6	

In East, we have Q105 in a suit. The deuce is led from dummy; many players would play the 10, instead the 5, for make muddy the water. The limpid Helen, instead, plays the natural 5; the declarer finesses the jack and he's quite happy of the success. He'll draw the ace and Helen - no longer so limpidly - suggests to throws out the queen. Let see now if the declarer will guess in west 10873, or does not.

Sure to have this women at table, as opponent, would have been a nightmare. Sure to have her as partner would were a delight. Howard Dietz, a strong dilettante (journalist and film writer, author of the Metro Goldwin Mayer slogan "Ars Gratia Artis", surrounding the lion), has said of Helen: "If you aren't able to play well with her, you aren't able to play well"

(Sources: Official Encyclopedia - ACBL Hall of Fame - )