

# Victoria Azarenka – the Bright Side of Belarus

The 22-year-old Belarusian Victoria Azarenka has just defeated Maria Sharapova to win the Australian Open and take over the women's No. 1 tennis ranking. Very few people know that Sharapova's parents are also from Belarus. They fled their home to escape the fallout from the Chernobyl explosion before she was born.

Although Sharapova sometimes visits Homel, the native town of her parents, Azarenka has a much stronger connection with the country. She regards Minsk as her most beloved city where she often travels to to have fun.

## Victoria's Early Career in Belarus

Victoria Azarenka was born on July 31, 1989 in the capital of Belarus, Minsk. Her parents were born in the village Seleckaye in the Mahilyou region in the east of the country. They moved to Minsk in 1986 where Victoria was born.

According to [minsktennis.com](http://minsktennis.com) Victoria started practicing tennis at the age of seven. Her first coach in Minsk was Valyantsina Rzhanykh who helped Victoria fall in love with the game and noticed the girl's talent. Already at that time her talent was obvious and she had great determination to succeed.

In an interview with Belarusian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, her first coach said that Viktoria had a very solid character and was never afraid of anybody. She could fight with any opponent even if they were much taller and older than her.

Vika, with other Belarusian boys and girls, fielded balls for older players such as Max Mirnyi and Vladimir Volchokov who have represented Belarus in the Davis Cup. Who would have imagined that she would far exceed her idols?

## **Minsk is Her Most Beloved City**

Victoria calls Minsk her favourite city and although she spends most of her time elsewhere, she is always happy to come back. In 2010, Vika organized a charity exhibition match with then No. 1 female tennis player Caroline Wozniacki, to raise money for children in Minsk. This is what she said about the charity match with Wozniacki in Minsk:

*This match was broadcasted throughout Europe. We have collected a relatively large sum of money and attracted much attention to the Republican Center for Pediatric Oncology and Hematology. Belarus has never seen anything like it, so it's a lot of spectators, and tickets sold out literally in two days.*

The charity tennis event was very successful – many people showed up to support the cause. Azarenka and Wozniacki had an emotional experience when they visited children with cancer in a Minsk hospital.

She regularly follows the development of tennis in Belarus, according to [minsktennis.com](http://minsktennis.com):

*Belarus has more tennis schools now. I wish that we had more juniors, because a lot of kids play well until they reach 14 – 16, and then, unfortunately, they are no longer progressing. I think with the new structure, with new preparation and with new support, there will be more and more tennis players in our country and we will have healthy competition.*

Last October in her interview with Belarusian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, she said that she had recently moved from the United States to live in Europe:

*I became calmer on the court, began to receive more pleasure from tennis – this brought self-confidence and a more*

*positive attitude. It is important to emphasize that for the next season I will not be training in America, as I have for the last six or seven years. I will work in Monte Carlo, I now live there.*

She was then planning her trip to Minsk: "I am flying to Minsk on a direct flight, I will have fun there..."

In recent interview to the Australian Open organizers when asked where she feels at home, she did not hesitate to say that "home is always going to be Belarus."

Good luck Vika, you are the bright side of Belarus!