

Petr Izmailov

**From Chess Champion of Russia
to Enemy of the People**

The Truth About My Father

Nikolai Izmailov

With games analysis by Mihail Marin

Petr Izmailov: From Chess Champion of Russia to Enemy of the People –
The Truth About My Father

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8	Glushanovsky	Izmailov	Queen's Indian Defense	1926
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Preface

We're always thinking of eternity as an idea that cannot be understood, something immense. But why does it have to be like that? What if, instead of all this, you suddenly find just a little room there, something like a village bath-house, grimy, and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is?
Arkady Svidrigailov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment"

In June 1997, the first grandmaster chess tournament dedicated to the memory of my father, Petr Nikolaevich Izmailov, was held in Tomsk. It was called Tomsk Chess 1997.

Before the opening ceremony, the chief arbiter, the late Vladimir Dvorkovich (father of the current FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich) approached me and said that, as he passed the hall, he had by chance overheard two chess fans talking, and one of them asked the other, "Who is Izmailov?"

This question made me think for a while, and, after some time, I decided to tell everyone about my father as well as I could, to tell the truth, since I'd already gathered quite a lot of material.

This book came about as a result of many years of researching information about him. It was first self-published in hand-written format exactly 20 years ago, in 2001. The second edition (enhanced and still hand-written) was published in 2006, followed by a ring-bound typed version that was also updated and republished several times. And now, it finally gets published as a real book for the first time, encompassing all my research, in my 87th year.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me with searching for and processing the information. Special thanks to Sergey Borisovich Voronkov (Moscow), Yuri Lvovich Averbakh (Moscow), Marat Faridovich Khasanov (Kazan), Boris Kimovich Shaidullin (Tomsk), Vladislav Georgievich Novikov (Moscow), Tatiana Viktorovna Magazinnikova (Tomsk), Valentin Valerievich Kron (Irkutsk) and Ramil Askhatovich Mukhometzyanov (Irkutsk).

Nikolai Petrovich Izmailov,
Irkutsk 2021

Introduction: A Book Decades in the Making

The name of the first chess champion of Soviet Russia¹, Petr Izmailov, is largely unknown to the wider chess public. His name disappeared from the pages of the chess press in the late 1930s, together with thousands of other names that disappeared at the time, and remained forgotten for more than 50 years. To be fair, we should point out that the Tomsk newspaper *Krasnoe Znamya* (No. 136, 14th June 1969) published an article about my father, called “Tomsk Player Defeats Botvinnik”, but this was more of a fleeting moment, and the article remained largely unnoticed.

I learned relatively recently that Grandmaster Nikolai Krogius toured Siberian towns about 60 years ago and published an article called “On the History of Chess in Siberia” in the May 1961 issue of the Novosibirsk magazine *Sibirskie Ogni*. Krogius mentioned my father’s successes in the Siberian championships, his victory in the 1928 Championship of Soviet Russia and his reaching the last four of the 1929 Soviet Championship, where he defeated Botvinnik and became the first official chess master of Siberia, but the grandmaster shied away from mentioning his tragic fate. Even though the Khrushchev Thaw was already in full swing, the fear of mentioning the events of 1937 was still deeply ingrained in everyone’s mind.

Apart from the tiniest of exceptions, my father’s name was only really mentioned again in print after more than 50 years of silence in the *Shakhmatisty Rossii* newspaper (No. 1, 1989), in an article called “The Lost Trace” by Isaak Romanov, Candidate of Historical Sciences, one of Russia’s most prominent chess historians (now deceased), where he recounted several episodes from my father’s life.

Afterwards, *Krasnoe Znamya* printed an article called “A Champion Who Lived in Tomsk”. Its author, Sergei Grodzensky, wrote a series of columns in 64 – *Shakhmatnoe Obozrenie*, called “The Memorial of Conscience”, gathering information on chess players and composers who suffered unjust repression in the Stalin years.

Both authors asked readers to share anything they knew about the life and fate of the first Russian champion, Petr Izmailov. I of course replied to their requests, and my letters were published in that same 1989, both in *Krasnoe Znamya* (the article was called “The First Champion of

¹ The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – the largest component of the Soviet Union, largely what is today the Russian Federation

Russia”) and *Shakhmatisty Rossii* (No. 9, 1989, in the article “A Thread Cut Short”).

In 1990, Grodzensky published a big article about my father in *64 – Shakhmatnoe Obozrenie* (No. 12, June), called “The First Champion”; he used some of my materials and my father’s photos shared by me. In 1991, *Shakhmatisty Rossii* (No. 2) printed a small article called “Petr Izmailov’s Kazan School”, describing the years my father spent in Kazan.

Then, in 1995, the book *Sibir Shakhmatnaya (Chess in Siberia)* by Kur, Neishtadt and Sukharev was published in Novosibirsk – it became an important event for Siberian chess life. The book contained stories about Siberian chess players and chess life; one chapter, “Died A Champion”, was dedicated to my father.

The article by Tomsk University assistant professor B. Slutsky, “Tomsk Players Knew Something About the Ancient Game”, published in *Krasnoe Znamya* (Tomsk, No. 30, 1st February 1996), also contained some information about my father.

“Two Fates” – that was the name of the article in the same newspaper (No. 291–294, 20th September 1996), written by Boris Shaidullin, the chairman of the Tomsk Region Chess Federation. Shaidullin, together with V. A. Voschinina, wrote another article about my father’s tragic fate: “A Simple Story” (*Obschaya Gazeta*, No. 17, 30th April – 7th May 1997).

Interesting and unusual conclusions about my father’s fate were made in the German magazine *Schach magazin 64*; it published two articles (in No. 15, 1997 and No. 1, 1998), based on research by the prominent Czech chess historian Jan Kalendovsky and some German researchers; they gave their own principled evaluation to everything that happened to my father, events that didn’t enjoy wide coverage in our own press.

Shakhmaty v Rossii (No. 1–3, 1999) published my own article in the section “Black Pages of History”, called “Petr Izmailov’s Calvary”.

E. Tailasheva from Tomsk, corresponding author of *Tomskiy Vestnik*, published an essay in 2001 called *Petr Izmailov: from Chess King to Traitor of the Homeland*.

And in 2005, Sergei Grodzensky published the book *Lubyanka Gambit*, containing a lot of information on chess players and chess composers who fell victim to repression during the Stalinist purges². There were chapters on V. Petrovs, M. Shebarshin, A. Kubbel, M. Platov, L. Zalkind, many other

² An English translation of this book by Elk and Ruby Publishing House is forthcoming

chess players and even N. Krylenko himself, who, as we know, couldn't avoid Stalin's torture chambers either: he was executed, like those innocent victims he sent to death beforehand.

Grodzensky dedicated a big chapter of that book to the memory of my father, called "The First Russian SFSR Champion, P. N. Izmailov". He provided a detailed chess biography of my father, using many materials and photos provided by me.

In 2007, the well-known chess historian Sergey Voronkov published his book *Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships*³; in the chapters about the 1929 and 1931 championships, the author dedicated quite a bit of space to my father, showing both his wins against Botvinnik and the ending of his game against the famous master Nikolai Grigoriev. In that book, Voronkov gave his principled opinion about many events of the time, including my father's career.

In that same 2007, Yuri Averbakh published his own book, *What the Pieces Don't Mention*. He also discussed my father's chess career, emphasizing his disagreement with the decision of the Chess Committee Executive Bureau: in 1935, he wrote, they stripped 14 masters including Izmailov of this title, which was ostensibly awarded for life.⁴

Indeed, earlier, back in 1998, during the second memorial tournament in honor of my father, Averbakh visited the tournament as a guest of honor. In a conversation with me, he also said that this decision to strip the masters of their titles was unfair.

In 2008, Shaidullin published his book called *Glavnyi Khod! (The Main Move!)*. He presented a copy to me with the following inscription:

"With great respect, to Nikolai Petrovich Izmailov, commemorating our joint work on rehabilitating the honorable name of Petr Nikolaevich Izmailov. B. K. Shaidullin, November 2008."

Indeed, this book contains a lot of information about my father's chess career and fate.

I would like to mention another book that mentions my father's name. This work was written by the joint 1927 Soviet chess champion, Fyodor

³ Published in English as *Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships Volume I (1920-1937)* by Elk and Ruby Publishing House, 2020 (FIDE 2020 book of the year bronze medalist)

⁴ The precise number of masters stripped of the title is subject to interpretation (Averbakh must have included two masters who were awarded the master's title prior to the revolution, but not a 15th, Sozin, who is discussed on page 170 of this book) but my father was certainly among them

Bogatyrchuk. He was a radiologist by trade, living in Kiev. After refusing to evacuate in 1941 when the Nazis approached Kiev, he stayed in the city and worked with the Germans. When our army liberated Kiev, he escaped to the west together with the Germans and started working with General Vlasov. He managed to avoid repatriation and emigrated to Canada; in 1978, he published his memoir, *My Life Path to Vlasov and the Prague Manifesto*.

In his book, Bogatyrchuk wrote in respect of the 1929 Soviet Championship, “The completely unknown Izmailov suddenly shone brightly and just as suddenly disappeared like a meteor; nobody had heard about him before the tournament, then he dropped out and was never heard of again. Since people would often disappear without trace in the depths of the NKVD at the time, nobody paid attention to Izmailov’s disappearance, and he was only briefly mentioned in the press. Because of this incident, only three players took part in the final.”

I’ll express my opinion about my father’s absence from the 1929 Soviet Championship final later, but here I would like to disagree with the author who suggested that my father was completely unknown. Even before that championship, my father’s name was mentioned numerous times both in chess periodicals and the central press. By that time, he was a two-time Omsk champion, two-time Tomsk champion, had won two All-Siberian tournaments, the first Volga Region Championship and, finally, the first Championship of Soviet Russia in 1928, earning the right to play in the Soviet Championship of 1929. Though I do agree that my father had never played in national-level tournaments before, if we don’t count the 1924 Intercity Tournament that accompanied the 3rd Soviet Championship.

Bogatyrchuk’s assertion that my father “was never heard of again” is also rather perplexing. He was! Moreover, my father and Bogatyrchuk even played in another tournament at the same time – in the 7th Soviet Championship in 1931, but in different groups: my father played in Group 4, and Bogatyrchuk in Group 5.

Well, Bogatyrchuk wrote his book in Canada, almost 50 years after the events he described. He couldn’t access any archive materials and could rely only on his own memory, but, as we see, human memory is imperfect and cannot be trusted completely. I can only add that Bogatyrchuk never played my father, but he played Botvinnik five times, winning three games and drawing the other two.

In 2019, the second edition of the book *Chess History of Tatarstan* was published in Kazan. Its author, chess writer and journalist Marat Khasanov, managed to access the republican archives and find a lot of information on the Izmailov family, including my father and his parents, brothers and sisters.

I'm very grateful to him for the information on my family which he published in his book (and also for information which had remained unpublished).

Trying to reconstruct my father's entire chess career, I visited the Central Chess Club library in Moscow and went through *Shakhmatny Listok* (*Shakhmaty v SSSR* since July 1931), Grekov's magazine *Shakhmaty*, and *64* magazine (*64 – Shakhmatno-Shashechnaya Gazeta* since July 1935) published in 1922–1936 – during the time my father played in chess tournaments.

By correlating materials from the aforementioned publications and adding information from city and regional newspapers from Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Irkutsk and Krasnoyarsk that also reported on the Siberian region's chess life, I think I've managed to retrace my father's chess career almost completely.

In this book I try to tell you about my father, using recollections of my mother Galina Efimovna Kozmina, who was repressed later in 1937 as a “family member of a traitor to the homeland” and sent to labor camps for 8 years. She served her entire sentence in Kolyma, then was rehabilitated in 1957 and died in 1987. Had she lived just a couple of years more, she could have seen her husband's name finally return to the pages of the chess press. Unfortunately, I have no memories of my father at all, because I wasn't even two years old when he was arrested.

Introduction to the Chess of Petr Izmailov, by Grandmaster Mihail Marin

The games examined in this book belong to a category that never ceases to fascinate me. I am referring to the games played by the Soviet masters (not necessarily future world champions) between the wars.

The early times of Soviet chess featured, in their incipient forms, the basic traits which many outstanding players developed over several decades later. The principled decisions, combined with the incurable Russian fearlessness and optimism, the curiosity for finding the hidden truth and discovering new paths, make these games very interesting (and useful) to study in detail.

I met the publisher's proposition to annotate the available games of Petr Nikolaevich Izmailov with great eagerness. The moment could not have been better, since a few days later I was going to travel to Benasque, in order to play in my first classical tournament after a 16-month break. I needed to get in shape and felt that analyzing these games would be an excellent method.

The tournament routine was pleasant and, as it turned out, effective. During the morning before each round, my wife Maria, a woman FIDE master, and I spent a few hours on a pretty terrace, armed with our chess sets and a game collection each. While Maria studied the best games of Lev Polugaevsky, I submitted the available games played by Izmailov to a deep analytical process.

During the evenings, I shared my most interesting discoveries with Maria and with our friends, Grandmaster Dieter Nisipeanu and Woman Grandmaster Mihaela Sandu. A lover of chess beauty and an original player himself, Dieter reacted with enthusiasm to many of the lines I showed, confirming my feeling that I was on the right path.

This routine proved beneficial, since my wife and I played well, despite our lack of practice during the long pandemic months. It did not seem to harm Dieter's play, either, as he convincingly won the tournament.

After our return home, the engine confirmed much of my analysis, but also helped me to discover new dimensions of the inner truth hidden in the games. Writing the verbal comments was natural and easy, since I had developed my main ideas during the mornings and evenings in Benasque.

When visually scanning the texts of the games, I noticed a curious detail. The statistics were not at all typical for a "best games" collection: 8 wins, 14 losses and 3 draws. The chess journalist and longstanding friend of Nikolai Petrovich Izmailov Ramil Mukhometzyanov, who helped to update this book

while both his family and Nikolai's family battled Covid in Irkutsk, offered a logical explanation. Petr Izmailov's archive was lost for obvious reasons and all 25 surviving games have been taken either from other archives or from the publications of those times. Even if Izmailov won a city tournament, the local newspaper would normally publish a loss, since winning against him was frequently a sensation for his opponent, one that had to be written about. After all, he was the first master of Siberia! This is similar to a situation when a grandmaster gives a simul. The chess press may publish his rare losses and none of his wins!

Izmailov's negative score in the available games did not prevent me from highlighting his style and greatest strengths. The results of the games did not affect the process of picturing the whole panorama of Soviet chess at master level from those years.

Izmailov's general approach to chess is a model that will never lose its validity. He was mainly a positional player, but his play was never marked by boring routine. He used to set ambitious strategic goals for himself and would use any situation he considered favorable to stir up tactical complications. I found his tactical battles the most inspiring for analysis, but the strategic struggles also featured many instructive moments.

I should also say more than just a few words about Izmailov's play in the opening. He seemed to prefer the classical systems, for instance the Ruy Lopez and the Queen's Gambit Declined with Black. This did not prevent him from occasionally using openings that were still in the process of becoming popular, such as the Queen's Indian, the King's Indian and the Sicilian. With White, he usually opened with 1.d4, following the main lines after 1...d5, but contributing to the opening of new paths in the King's Indian.

However, these are only statistics based on a small number of games. It is clear that Izmailov's play showed that he was up-to-date with the latest theoretical developments, frequently based on the games of Capablanca, Alekhine and other great players of the time. He did not blindly follow the recent trends, though, but passed the new findings through his filter and made his own contribution to further developments.

From a historic perspective, many of the variations deployed by Izmailov have maintained their viability over the decades and some of his experiments still find echoes in modern practice.

I would not tell the whole truth if I did not mention that most of Izmailov's opponents were also aware of the latest theoretical trends and discoveries. The opening phase was rarely one-way traffic. In a very wide sense, the opening battle was not that much different from the theoretical fight seen in modern tournaments.

In my comments to the opening phase of the games, I have usually highlighted both historic aspects, encompassing the predecessors and the ulterior developments.

Also, importantly, in advance of the publication of this book in English we contacted Jeff Sonas of the Chessmetrics website to ask for estimates of Izmailov's ranking and rating. Izmailov was not listed on the Chessmetrics website due to a lack of information, but based on the tournament tables we provided Jeff kindly calculated that Izmailov's rating at the end of 1929 would have placed him around number 50 in the world, roughly on the level of the young Botvinnik, Flohr and Richter. The Elo that he calculated, 2542, is in itself very respectable, but bear in mind the Elo inflation since then – today's number 50 at the time of writing (in the September 2021 FIDE list), Maxim Matlakov, is rated 2683, which highlights just how strong a player Izmailov was for his time.

The story written by Nikolai Petrovich about his father is fascinating, an emotional, ultimately tragic roller-coaster and a deep dive into one of contemporary history's blackest moments, but the games are anything but an appendix. Analyzing games of players of different levels and from different generations can be useful. I can testify that working on them yielded me exquisite intellectual pleasure and I can only regret that gathering a collection of Izmailov's best games was impossible.

Domnesti, Ilfov, Romania, September 2021

Early Life

My father was born on 13th July 1906 (30th June old style) in Kazan. Only one childhood photograph of him survived – a photo of nine year-old Petr, pupil of the 2nd Kazan Grammar School.



Petr Izmailov as a grammar school student, 1915

His father, Nikolai Petrovich Izmailov senior, was born in 1868. After graduating from the Kazan Seminary in 1888, he served in the Bogorodinsky monastery, founded by Ivan the Terrible, and then, as the archive documents show, he was ordained as a minister by bishop Kirill. Since 1910, he was a member of the Kazan Consistory and taught theology, the so-called “law of God”, in Realschules in Kazan.

Here’s an interesting fact. The students of one of the schools my grandfather taught in included the Skryabin brothers, one of them was called Slava. Later, he became known as Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet government minister.

During his spotless 30-year service, my grandfather received several awards from the ecclesiastical authorities. In 1893, “for useful and industrious service to God’s Church”, he was awarded a *nabedrennik*, in 1898, he received a *skufia*, in 1901 – a *kamilavka*⁵, and in 1906, a golden Synodal pectoral cross. In 1911, in honor of the 15th anniversary of Nicholas II’s ascension to the throne, my grandfather was awarded the Order of St. Anna, 3rd class; in 1915, he was promoted to protoiereus (a senior priest).

⁵ *Nabedrennik* is an Orthodox priestly vestment worn on the hip, usually awarded by bishops for long and dedicated service. *Skufia* is a soft priestly cap with a pointed top. *Kamilavka* (also kalimavkion) is a priestly hat that looks similar to a top hat, but without a brim.

to Konstantinopolsky and my father. I will only say that the perseverance and skill of his opponents also played an important role.

58 years after this game was played, its score was published by Isaak Romanov in the *Shakhmatisty Rossii* newspaper (No. 1, 1989). Here, this game is printed with annotations by Grandmaster Yuri Averbakh, and of course updated by Grandmaster Marin. Averbakh's annotations were first published in *Shakhmaty v Rossii* (No. 1–3, 1999) as an addendum to my article "Petr Izmailov's Calvary".

Game 21

Izmailov, Petr – Botvinnik, Mikhail

Soviet Championship Semi-Final

Group 4 Moscow (6),

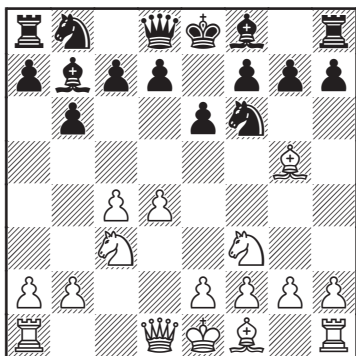
16th October 1931

Queen's Indian Defense [E12]

(Comments in italics by Yuri

Averbakh)

1. d4 ♘f6 2. ♘f3 b6 3. c4 ♙b7
4. ♘c3 e6 5. ♙g5

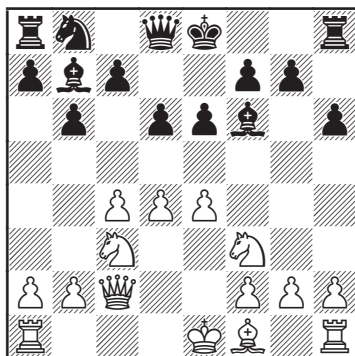


5... ♙e7

5... ♙b4 is more active.

Even though White's system has lost most of its initial popularity, it seems that it was not Botvinnik's lucky variation. More than three decades later he lost an important game continuing: 5...h6 6. ♙h4 g5 7. ♙g3 ♘h5 8. e3 ♘xg3 9. hxg3 ♙g7 10. ♖c2 ♘c6 Uhlmann-Botvinnik, Varna 1962. In this game, too, Botvinnik refrained from early pawn confrontation in the center, playing more in a hyper-modern style.

6. ♖c2 h6 7. ♙xf6 ♙xf6 8. e4 d6



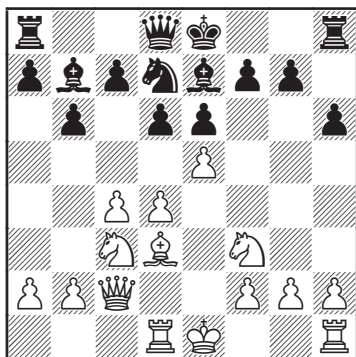
Black plays in the spirit of the Modern Defense, refraining from reaching the fifth rank with his pawns.

9.e5

A questionable plan. Opening the game plays into Black's hands, since he has the bishop pair.

Indeed, White should have chosen a plan like 9. ♖d1 ♘d7 10. ♙e2 focusing on preparing d4–d5.

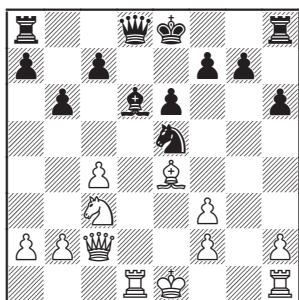
9... ♙e7 10. ♖d1 ♘d7 11. ♙d3



11...♖c8

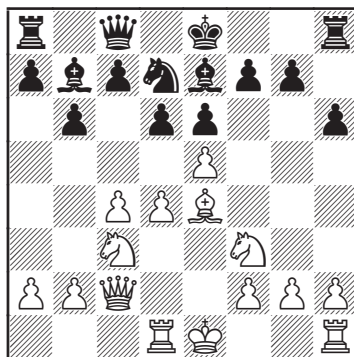
But not 11...dxe5 12.dxe5 ♘xf3
13.gxf3 ♗xe5 14.♙e4±

The final position in Averbakh's line is anything but clear, though. After 14...♙d6 Black gets great compensation for the exchange.



15.f4 (15.♙xa8 ♖xa8 leaves the pawns on f3 and c4 hanging, then 16.♖e4 ♖xe4+ 17.fxe4 ♗xc4 with a decent game for Black; a neutral move such as 15.b4 can be met with 15...f5, forcing matters, then 16.f4 ♗d7 with unclear play) 15...♗d7 16.♙xa8 ♖xa8 17.♖g1 ♖f3 with excellent compensation.

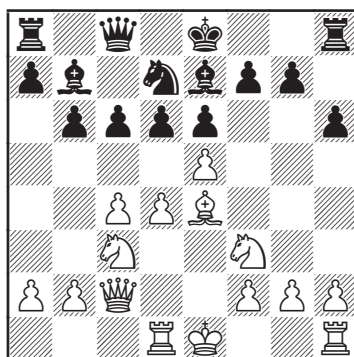
12.♙e4



12...c6?

Botvinnik was heading for the structure arising later in the game. He must have thought that his move order was the most restricting, but in doing so, he underestimated the dynamic factors.

He probably discarded the safer 12...dxe5 because of the intermediate 13.♙xb7 (13.dxe5 c6 is likely to transpose to the game) 13...♖xb7 14.dxe5 with approximate equality.



13.♖e2?!

Izmailov could have used his more natural development to break in the center with 13.d5! and Black

would have been in serious trouble:
 13...cxd5 14.cxd5 exd5 15.♙f5 ♖c7
 16.e6 with a strong initiative.

13...♖c7

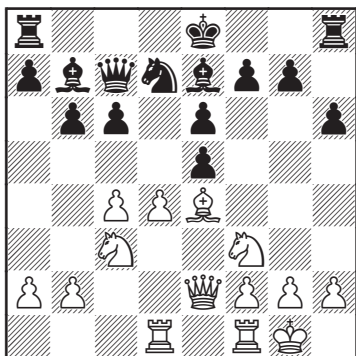
Planning ...0-0-0 with a counterattack on the kingside.

For known reasons, 13...dxe5! was better.

14.0-0

Once again missing 14.d5!

14...dxe5

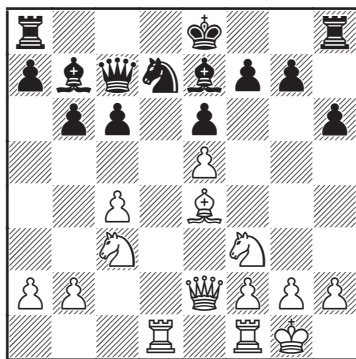


15.dxe5?!

Izmailov, too, shows his ambitions by avoiding early simplifications. However, keeping the knights on board will offer Black additional ideas for developing his kingside initiative.

15.♘xe5 ♞xe5 16.dxe5 would have led to approximate equality.

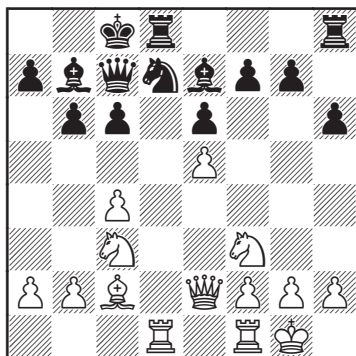
15.d5!? would only offer reasonable compensation for the pawn: 15...cxd5 16.cxd5 exd5 17.♘xd5 ♙xd5 18.♙xd5 ♖d8 19.♖fe1 and if Black intends to avoid any hint of trouble, he could return the pawn with 19...0-0, leading to complete equality.



15...0-0-0

15...g5 was tempting, for instance 16.♖fe1 g4 17.♘d4 ♞xe5 18.♘db5 ♖b8!, but a stronger line is 16.♙c2 g4 17.♘d4 ♞xe5 18.♖fe1 ♙f6 (18...♞d7 19.♘xe6!) 19.♘e4 ♙g7 (19...♙e7 20.♘g3) 20.♘d6+! and Black has to play 20...♙f8 (20...♖xd6 21.♘f5 ♖f8 22.♖d2 threatening ♖xe5 and ♖d7 mate)

16.♙c2



The position is not easy to evaluate. The pawn on e5 ensures White a space advantage, but can also become a target. Black's position also features a small dilemma. He

would like to play ...a7–a6 and ...c6–c5, in order to clear the bishop's path, but this would leave the knight passive.

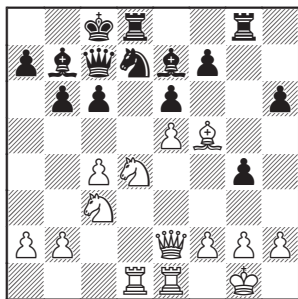
16...g5!

This resolute move combines a kingside attack with the idea of undermining the pawn on e5.

17.♖fe1 g4 18.♘d4 ♖hg8 19.f4!

White consolidates the pawn on e5, without fearing the opening of the g-file.

The unexpected 19.♙f5!? deserves consideration, too.

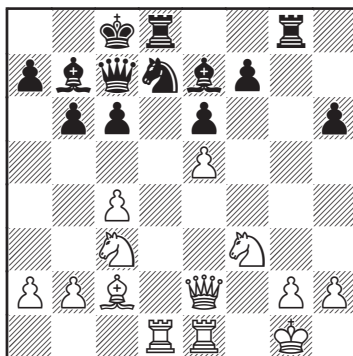


White attacks g4 and the bishop is not edible: 19...xf5? 20.e6 ♘e5 (20...fxe6 is even worse: 21.♘xe6 ♙b8 22.♘xd8 ♙xd8 23.♖xd7 ♙xd7 24.♙e6+ winning the rook and maintaining a decisive attack) 21.exf7 ♖g7 22.♙xe5 ♙xe5 23.♖xe5 ♖xf7 24.♘xf5 when White has an extra pawn and a dominant position. If Black tries to activate his bishop with ...c6–c5, the knights will get the d5–square.

However, Black can react better to the piece sacrifice: 19...♙c5 20.♙xg4 ♙xe5. After the

simplifications, Black's control of dark squares will yield him the better game.

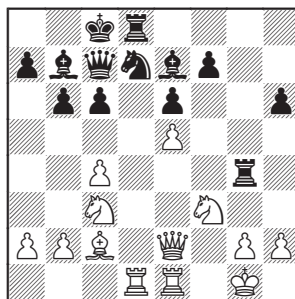
19...gxf3 20.♘xf3



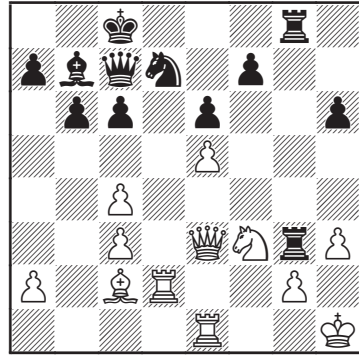
20...♙b4?!

Losing control over the dark squares; 20...♙a6!?

Averbakh is right when criticizing the last move, but his comment does not touch the core of the matter. The final evaluation of the position depends on timing. If White manages to consolidate, he will have chances to maintain an advantage. Therefore, Black should develop his counterplay as quickly as he can and this is likely to yield him a superior position. 20...♖g4!



21.h3 (White cannot defend g2 with 21.♔h1 ♖dg8 22.♖g1 because of 22...♙c5; after 21.♖d2 ♖dg8, the white queen does not have the optimal e3-square available as in the game: 22.♚d3 ♙a6 23.b3 ♙b4 followed by ...b6–b5 with a strong initiative) 21...♖g7 22.♖d2 ♖dg8 (once again, the queen needs to stay away from e3) 23.♚d1 ♙b4 with excellent play for Black.

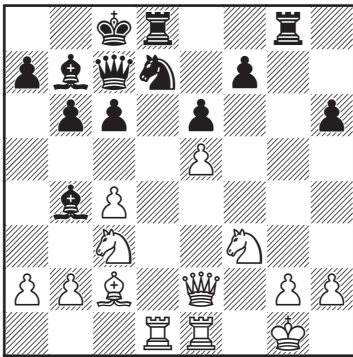


White has solved all his problems and it is now Black's turn to look for a way of maintaining equality.

25...h5?

Botvinnik treats the position too statically, as though he had all the time in the world to strengthen his position.

True, 25...c5? is premature due to 26.♙e4 stabilizing White's advantage.



21.♔h1!

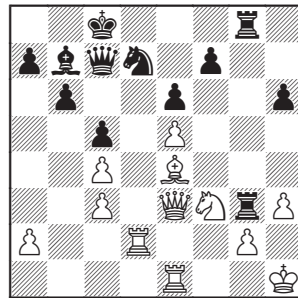
Izmailov makes use of the gifted tempo in the best way possible. His last move removes the danger of a pin along the dark-squared diagonal.

21...♖g4 22.h3 ♖g3 23.♖d2 ♙xc3

This exchange was meant to solve the aforementioned dilemma involving Black's minor pieces. At some point, the knight will go to c5 and the bishop to a6.

23...♖dg8 24.♚e3 does not change much.

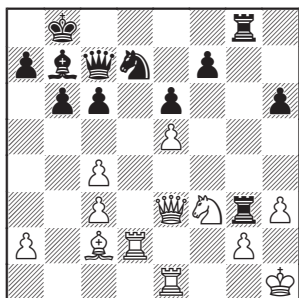
24.bxc3 ♖dg8 25.♚e3



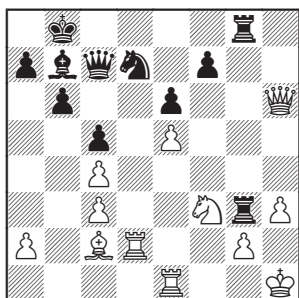
Tactics do not work for Black here: 26...♞xe5? 27.♙xb7+ ♚xb7 28.♚xe5 ♖xf3 29.gxf3 ♚xf3+ 30.♔h2 when all the important squares are defended and Black is simply a rook down.

The only correct continuation was 25...♔b8!, which was to a certain

extent similar to Izmailov's earlier ♔h1 .



This move has two main ideas. In the lines with $\dots c6-c5$, ♕xb7 will come without a check. Secondly, the king also clears the c8-square for the bishop, in order to overprotect the knight if necessary. Now $26.\text{♖xh6}$ (26.a4? allows $26\dots c5$ $27.\text{♕e4}$ ♗xe5 ! $28.\text{♕xb7}$ ♗xc4 ! winning material; $26.\text{♖ed1}$ is easily parried with $26\dots \text{♕c8}$) $26\dots c5$

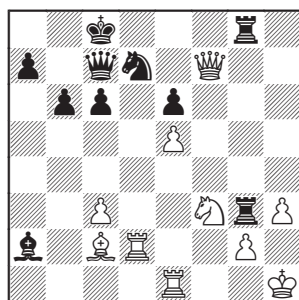


$27.\text{♕h7}$! (White has to be careful already; his last move induces Black to weaken his back rank defense, whereas $27.\text{♕e4}$? runs into $27\dots \text{♗xe5}$! $28.\text{♕xb7}$ ♗xb7 ! $29.\text{♖xe5}$ ♖xf3 ! with a clear advantage: the rook is taboo now, since the square on g3 is not defended by the queen

as in the above variation) $27\dots \text{♖g7}$ $28.\text{♕e4}$! ♕c8 ($28\dots \text{♗xe5}$ is impossible due to $29.\text{♗h8+}$ ♕c8 $30.\text{♗xe5}$ ♗xe5 $31.\text{♖d8}$ or $29\dots \text{♖g8}$ $30.\text{♗xe5}$, winning in both cases) $29.\text{♕c2}$ (defending the pawn on e5) $29\dots \text{♕b7}$ with a probable draw by repetition.

26.a4

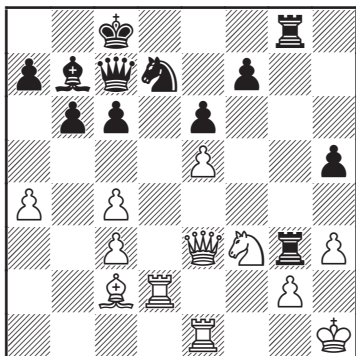
$26.\text{♗h6}$ ♕a6 ! $27.\text{♗xh5}$ ♕xc4 $28.\text{♗xf7}$ ♕xa2 .



In the final position of Averbakh's variation, White has the elegant $29.\text{♕g6}$! ensuring him an advantage after $29\dots \text{♖3xg6}$ $30.\text{♖xa2}$, as Black's king is a bit unsafe and, in the endgame, White's connected passed pawns would be more dangerous than Black's queenside pawn majority.

After $26.\text{♗h6}$ Black once again has the prophylactic move $26\dots \text{♗b8}$! available, for instance $27.\text{♗xh5}$ $f5$ $28.\text{exf6}$ ♗xf6 $29.\text{♗e5}$! (otherwise, $\dots c6-c5$ would win) $29\dots \text{♗xe5}$ $30.\text{♖xe5}$ $c5$ and Black will retrieve the pawn with approximate equality.

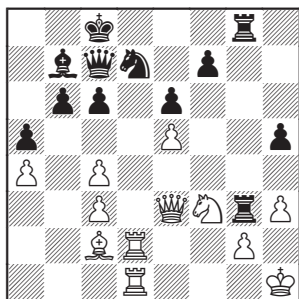
White's strongest continuation would have been $26.\text{♖ed1}$! ♗c5 $27.\text{♖f2}$!? preparing to increase the pressure with, say, ♖d4 and ♗f4 .



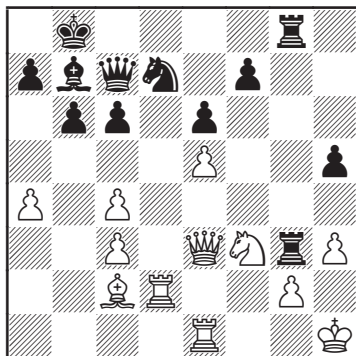
26...♔b8?

Botvinnik chooses an unfortunate moment for this move. Under the circumstances, it simply wastes a tempo.

26...a5! would have stabilized the queenside and maintained the status quo. For instance: 27.♖ed1



27...♞xe5!! 28.♞xe5 ♞xe5 29.♞xe5 c5 30.♔g1 (of course, not 30.♖g1 ♖xh3 mate) 30... ♖xg2+ 31.♔f1 ♖g1+ 32.♔f2 ♖1g2+ and White should agree to a draw by perpetual, since 33.♔e3 ♖2g3+ 34.♔f4?! ♖xh3 would be dangerous for him. Black threatens ...f7-f6 with ideas of mate on f3 or g4.



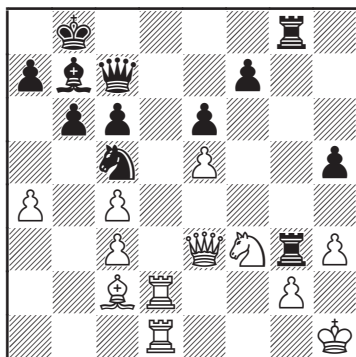
27.♖ed1!!

Against 27.♞h6 Botvinnik had prepared a combination: 27...c5 28.♙e4 ♞xe5 29.♙xb7 ♞xb7!

27...♞c5

27...♞xe5 does not work now, since after 28.♞xe5 ♞xe5 29.♞xe5 c5 White has 30.♖d8+! (a direct consequence of ...♔b8) 30...♖xd8 31.♖xd8+ ♔c7 32.♖d3 ♖xg2 33.♖d7+ ♔c8 34.♖xb7! winning.

27...♙c8 would have been fine if White could not have played 28.a5! weakening the enemy queenside, with chances to start an attack.



28.a5!

Ridding himself of the weak pawn.

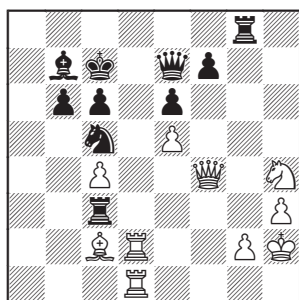
28...♖e7 29.axb6 axb6 30.♖f4
♔c7 31.♔h2

Creating the threat ♔h7.

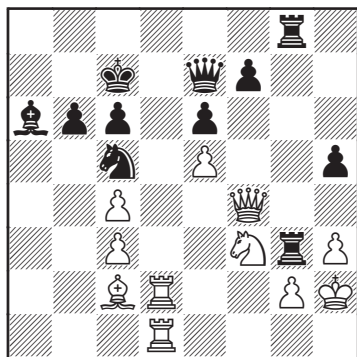
31...♔a6

31...h4! was essential, defending the rook on g3 in advance.

In fact, this allows White to start a decisive attack after 32.♞xh4 ♜xc3



33.♞f5! exf5 (otherwise, Black's position would be simply bad)
34.e6+ ♔c8 35.exf7 ♖xf7 36.♔xf5+ winning.

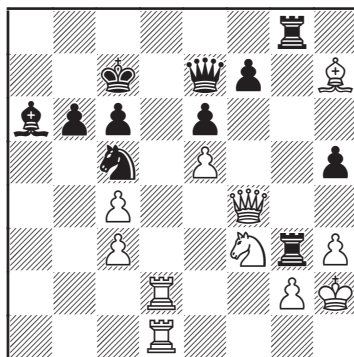


32.♔h7

A tempting continuation, which will work out well in the game.

32.♖f6 ♖xf6 33.exf6 h4 does not promise White much.

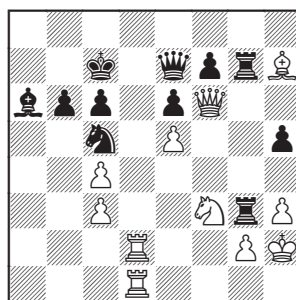
Objectively, the most constructive move would have been 32.♖f2! still preparing ♖f6 (maybe with ♜d4 in between).



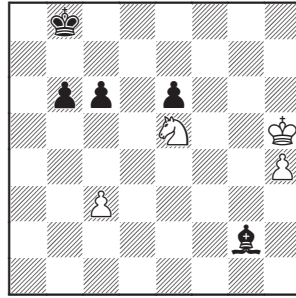
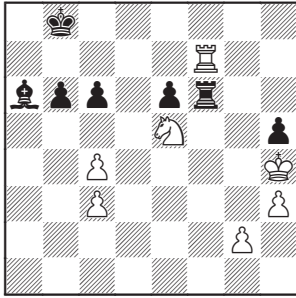
32...♖3g7?

This loses the exchange without any compensation.

32...♖8g7 33.♖f6! would be very unpleasant:



33...♖xf6 (33...♖f8 34.♖d8 ♖xg2+ 35.♔h1+-) 34.exf6 ♖xh7
35.♔xg3 ♞e4+ 36.♔h4! (36.♔f4? ♞xd2 37.♖xd2 ♖h6 38.♔e5 h4 39.♞g5 ♖h5=) 36...♞xd2 37.♖xd2 ♖h6 38.♞e5 ♖xf6 39.♖d7+ ♔b8 40.♖xf7±

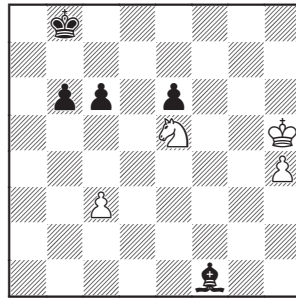
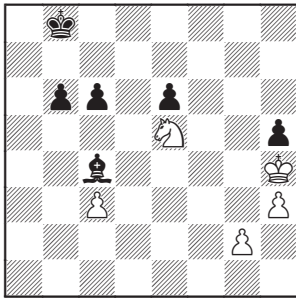


This is what both players must have calculated, too. However, the evaluation of the final position requires a considerable adjustment.

40...♖xf7 41.♘xf7 ♙xc4. The bishop will arrive on f1 just in time to avoid losing a pawn.

42.♗e5 (42.♙xh5 ♙f1 may transpose).

44...♙f1! (the bishop needs to start fighting against the advance of the pawn at once. In the event of say 44...♙c7? 45.♙g5 ♙d6 46.♙f6 White gains time for the race: 46... ♙e4 47.h5 ♙c5 48.h6 ♙h7 49.♙g7 ♙e4 50.♗g6 winning. In the main variation, White will have to lose additional time on making the h5-square available for the pawn):

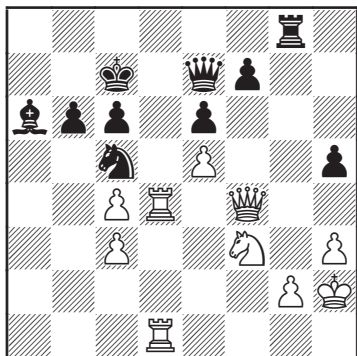


Black's position remains dangerous, but he can reach a draw with a few very precise moves.

42...♙f1! 43.♙xh5 (43.♗xc6+ ♙c7 helps Black to activate his king. He will give up the bishop for the h-pawn when needed and proceed with queenside counterplay) 43... ♙xg2 44.h4

45.♙g5 ♙e2 46.♗g4 b5 47.h5 c5 48.h6 ♙d3 49.♗e5 ♙h7 50.♗d7+ ♙c7 51.♗f8 (White has almost succeeded, but only "almost") 51... b4! 52.cxb4 cxb4 53.♗xh7 b3 54.♗f6 b2 55.h7 b1=♙ 56.h8=♙ with a draw.

33. ♙xg8 ♖xg8 34. ♖d4



The rest is a formality.

34...♔c8 35.♚h6 ♘d7 36.♖f4 c5
 37.♚xh5 ♖g7 38.♗g4 f5 39.♗xg7
 ♚xg7 40.♖e1 ♔b7 41.♚g5 ♚h8
 42.♚e7 ♚h6 43.♚d6+ ♔c8 44.♖d1
 ♚f4+ 45.g3

Averbakh gives the following line:
 45...♚xf3 46.♚xd7+ ♔b8 47.♚d8+
 ♔a7 48.♖a1+ ♔a6 49.♚c7+.

1–0

My father never played Botvinnik again, and I think that he is one of the very few chess players who had a positive score against the future world champion, 2-0.

As it turns out, the world champion remembered those losses for his entire life. Genna Sosonko confirmed that in his Russian-language book *My Testimony*, writing that, shortly before Botvinnik's death, the ex-world champion visited him in the Netherlands. Recalling his lifetime score against Bogatyrychuk (0-3, with two draws), he said, "...But what can you do? There was a forester in Siberia named Izmailov, I

lost two games to him as well – one in Odessa 1929, and the other in the 1931 semi-final, I barely made it to the final."

Of course, my father was never a forester – he travelled to the taiga as the head of geological survey parties. Such a dismissive remark from Botvinnik surely wasn't an accident.

It's well-known that the ex-world champion had tense relations with many players, especially those who dared encroach on his leadership. He told Sosonko that he had a sour relationship with Romanovsky, and that he had cut off all contact with David Bronstein and Tigran Petrosian: they literally hated each other. His relationship with Grigory Levenfish was quite tense, and even that with Vasily Smyslov for a time. And let's not get started discussing Bogatyrychuk.

In a private conversation in 1997, Andre Arnoldovich Lilienthal, the oldest living grandmaster at the time and a guest of honor at my father's first memorial tournament, also told me of the difficult, peculiar character of the world champion; he met him over the chess board 12 times in 1934–1945.

Botvinnik obviously didn't like my father too much (mildly speaking), which was noted by Voronkov and Khasanov in their aforementioned books. Both of them highlighted that, in his entire long life, the first Soviet world champion