

Korchnoi Year by Year

Volume I (1945-1968)

Hans Renette and Tibor Karolyi

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Introduction by FIDE Master Hans Renette

After having written several books on 19th century chess masters, I gained a growing interest in the second half of the previous century. I began playing the game in 1990, so Viktor Korchnoi was always a well-known name for me (Paul Van der Sterren aptly called him, “the man who was always there”). It was, though, only recently that I considered writing a biography of him. A few elements appealed a lot to me.

First of all, I remember well the book with his 400 games published shortly after his defection. I played over many of these games in the early 90s and found them both intriguing as well as difficult. Secondly, Korchnoi’s longevity as a chess player was a true challenge. Initially, it was my purpose to focus on his stay in the West, but for obvious reasons a complete biography is far more interesting and with the availability of the most important Russian chess magazines and translation software, this became feasible.

In hindsight, I can see some links with a few of the previous biographies I have written. With Emanuel Lasker, he has his long career and incredible defensive skills, resourcefulness and fighting attitude in common. One regularly reads or hears people talk about the uniqueness of Viktor Korchnoi in chess history. I can see various similarities with Henry Edward Bird as well: chess until an old age, an absolute passion for the game, a terrible and unsound aversion to draws and a great talent to be caught up in a variety of controversies.

Writing about such a player as Korchnoi, and presenting to the reader an extensive and deeply analysed collection of his many magnificent games, is probably too much of a daunting task for one person, and I was and am extremely glad when Tibor Karolyi offered to get on board once I spoke with him about his reminiscences of Korchnoi. Tibor is rightfully recognized as one of the greatest writing analysts of our game and I’m most excited to discover, together with you, dear reader, the various intricacies of Korchnoi’s incredible chess talent.

Finally, I wish to express my and Tibor’s gratitude to Manfred Olms for permission to print extracts from Korchnoi’s autobiography *Chess is My Life*.

Introduction by International Master Tibor Karolyi

I consider myself very fortunate because I have had the opportunity to write detailed chess biographies on many great players. It was such a pleasure covering the careers or at least parts of careers of world champions Carlsen, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov, Petrosian, Spassky and Tal (purely in alphabetical order). My special fortune has also provided me with the chance to write books on other great players: Beliavsky, Hort, Portisch, Seirawan, Timman and Torre. In many of these fantastic players' careers, Korchnoi played a fundamental role. Karpov, Kasparov, Petrosian, Spassky, Tal and Portisch between them played 12 matches against Korchnoi in World Championship cycles. Korchnoi won 6 and lost 6 of them. Korchnoi also played an exhibition match against Timman, while Seirawan trained with Korchnoi. A good 10 years ago I asked him to give me a long interview for a book, and he agreed on the condition that I would prepare for it by reading his books. I bought them and read them, but sadly that book never got to be written. Generally speaking, I knew a lot about his career. Hans then got in touch with me asking for some contact details of Hungarian players who had played Viktor. We had some chats, and it became clear that he was a highly skilful historian. I love finding unnoticed gems in the careers of great players and analysing their masterpieces. Writing chess biographies requires reading books in several languages: I like that part less and I feel that writing the chess history is not my greatest strength. So the idea was born in my mind of working together. I had positive experiences working with co-authors Nick Aplin, Tigran Gyozyalyan and Ferenc Berkes, so I suggested a joint project to Hans on Korchnoi's chess biography to combine and synergise our strengths. I was really happy when he agreed. The selection of the games is more mine, but we discussed it and he also chose quite a few of them. I made most of the analysis, but he read it and made additions and changes. The vast majority of the historical narrative – including facts and stories – is his work. In the book, therefore, where you see “I” in the historical narratives that's Hans' voice, while in the games analysis that's my voice, unless otherwise indicated.

Viktor Korchnoi enjoyed a unique career among the giants of chess. There were very few great players who never became a world champion, only three or four, but their careers can be compared with those players who obtained the highest title in chess. Not only is the level of his achievements rare, but he is unique regarding the environment he lived in. He became world class as a Soviet citizen; he was Soviet champion four times, Olympic champion six times, and a world champion candidate four times before his defection. Incredibly, Korchnoi was able to improve his level after celebrating his 45th birthday, and already living in exile. His time as a world class player was one



of the longest of all players: he broke into the top ten in 1954 and was in it even in 1990. He beat nine world champions, a record which he shares with Keres and Beliavsky. If one counts the 1955 Soviet championship, which was a zonal tournament, he recorded arguably the longest time spent fighting for the world championship, as his last attempt to gain the crown was in 2002. He fought three matches which decided who would be world champion. He played the most matches in chess world championships. His 1978 match against Karpov was the most hostile and belligerent match ever played in the history of chess.

In this four-volume chess biography we will look at more games in depth than in any other chess biography. It is partly because Korchnoi

enjoyed a longer chess career than any other great player, and he fought harder and took risk in more games. We analyse over 600 games.

He produced many masterpieces and is known for his counterattacking skills and good endgame play. Yet many features of his play are not widely known. Korchnoi scored many wonderful wins by impressive and forceful attack. It is remarkable how many times he broke through on the h-file. Viktor also won many games thanks to his superb opening preparation, introducing countless novelties. At the same time, he won many fantastic endgames, and he was one of the greatest rook endgame players, arguably the greatest. He probably managed to win more equal endgames than anybody else.

There is so much to learn from his games. I have written books on Soviet world champions Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Karpov and Kasparov, and judge Korchnoi the second-best among those players at openings, behind Kasparov, as well as the second-best in endgames, behind Karpov. Arguably, nobody was a greater and more fearless fighter than him. Probably no other player produced as many exciting fighting games as Korchnoi. There was never a dull moment when he played chess, with countless superb games.

Dear Reader, I hope you will appreciate the detailed way we covered one of the most unique careers of a truly great player who has made such a fundamental contribution to chess history.

A Little Acquaintance with the Man

It was only in the final days of his life, when his body was suffering terribly from internal haemorrhages, that the brilliant mind of Viktor Korchnoi gave way. He believed that he was a Soviet and German citizen and ordered his son Igor to kidnap him from the hospital and bring him back home, to Wohlen. The request was obviously denied. Then Viktor Korchnoi looked at Igor with a regard as if he wanted to burn everything and he roared like a lion.

This series of books relates the life and games of one of the game's greatest giants ever, perhaps of the player who deserved more than anybody else to become world champion and never did. It is greatly enriched by a large number of testimonies. At this point, we would especially like to thank and mention two persons. First of all Igor Kortchnoi, who, at the end of a long chat about his father and family, summarized: "It is not about Viktor the Great. It is not a happy story." It didn't come as a surprise to us...

Next, we are most grateful to Boris Kletinich. Like many others, he fell under the spell of Korchnoi's chess and the turmoil surrounding him in the 1970s. More than twenty years later, he had the opportunity to speak with the man, various people close to him and especially Rosa Fridman, Korchnoi's (step-)mother. We are very grateful that we are able to make use of the notes and videos he made back then.

Let us now introduce Viktor Korchnoi a little more, on the basis of a few testimonies. On 8 September 2022, we closed down a session on Teams after having spoken with Ronen Har Zvi for an hour. I (Hans) knew this GM's name from the 90s, but not much more. When I saw him mentioned in one of Genna Sosonko's books, he was added to my list of people to get in touch with. While preparing for the meeting, I also noticed his immortal bullet game against Roland Schmaltz.

When we finished our session, we were both very happy. Ronen shared with me his times with Viktor Korchnoi and the passion the man gave him. For the first time in almost thirty years, he delved deep in his memory to talk about some experiences with him, as well as about some regrets.

Viktor Korchnoi was a most controversial person, as will also become clear from this biography. Many who were close to him spoke harsh words about him, some others not only recognized the genius but also saw the different standards with which they have to be measured. The following text was written for us by Daniel Jakobs, Korchnoi's fitness coach when he was in full contention for the title of world champion.

Regarding the temperament of "der grimmige Viktor" or "Viktor the Terrible", I allow myself to say the following. I was lucky to train top-level athletes, in group and individual sports. A highly competitive individual

athlete often needs what in boxing is called “being hungry” or “wanting to eat the opponent’s liver”.

Great individual champions across sports are not usually altruistic, compassionate or likeable beings. They know perfectly well how much it cost them to get to the position they hold and how many would like to be in that place. There is also a topic, which we know as the “champion’s friend”. It’s about those people who approach the “champion” to enjoy the honey of that person’s success and as soon as the decline of fame or money begins, they disappear as quickly as they appeared. There are high-level athletes who can be more diplomatic and not as defensive socially and others who don’t bother to cover up those feelings. One who could and who was very good at this task, carrying out negotiations with counterparts, was Albi [Alban] Brodbeck, a lawyer by profession and accustomed to dealing with these issues. There were very combative people in our delegation, with a very strong character like Viktor, especially Petra Leeuwerik and Michael Stean. I don’t judge them, they suffered a lot in the past and Viktor embodied the fight against the establishment.

To this I must add that Viktor spent his childhood in a city surrounded, besieged and isolated by Nazism for 100 days and it is easy to imagine the collective and individual suffering of the survivors. It should also be mentioned that the USSR chose who were the ideal representatives of the people. Clearly Karpov fulfilled all those conditions and Viktor did not. Viktor was always a threat to them and had he stayed in the Soviet Union he would have played a second or third order chess role.

Everything I mention is to put in historical context what he had to live through and therefore the reason for his appearance and attitude so hostile and sullen.

The fact that I was the son of holocaust survivors allowed me to have a more indulgent and understanding view of him. I understood that he was a SURVIVOR.

My wife and I were the youngest of the delegation. We were both 23 years old. The freshness of that age allowed us to approach Viktor from a more loving side and with fewer preconceptions. The only celebration that took place during the two months of my stay at the Hotel Merano was my wife’s 24th birthday. That very combative environment that we lived in during the stay had some refreshing respite that night, which was very pleasant for everyone.

Both issues, understanding him as a survivor and the freshness of our age, allowed me to approach Viktor totally differently from the Viktor I had known up to then. I was able to enjoy a Korchnoi with fewer layers of protection on the outside and therefore meet a different human being. Geniuses, including Viktor, are one of a kind, they are different from us and one should not expect the same from them as is expected from ordinary mortals.

When a German chess magazine was looking to name the chess player of the 20th century, Artur Yusupov made a surprising choice by putting down Korchnoi. He deserved it more than Karpov or Kasparov, he said. For a period of fifty years, he played at an extremely high level and kept on improving. He always tried to find new and better ways, looked for something different. Korchnoi described his own playing style in a Latvian chess magazine in 1966 as follows: “I do not like to attack first, just as I do not like to sacrifice my pieces or pawns. I prefer to lure the enemy into a wilderness of complications, to give him the opportunity to feel the taste of the attack, during which he often gets carried away and weakens his bowel disposition or donates some material to me. In order to give the game such a direction, it is sometimes necessary to make ‘curves’, that is, not quite justified moves that do not meet objective requirements. And that comes with a certain amount of risk.”

Korchnoi’s legendary passion for chess combines with an infantilism in practical life. A small story to illustrate this comes from Lev Alburt. Timman was once asked to give a simul in Amsterdam. For his fee, he tried to aim high and said: “Give me the same as Korchnoi last year.” It resulted in a very moderate sum, half or a third as much as he would have normally asked for. Korchnoi never got bored of chess, was willing to analyse each possible position and when visiting the tournaments of Van Oosterom late in life, he was the last to leave the tournament hall, without taking a break for food or drink.

With old age and a slow decline, Korchnoi became increasingly severe towards his opponents. As Van der Sterren wrote on the Dutch website schaaksite.nl, he considered a mistake as a personal insult and in the end a verbal attack followed – most notably when the game had not ended well for Korchnoi.

At the end of his life, a very old Korchnoi played a game with Hans Bohm in a small Dutch tournament. The Dutch IM possessed a much better position, but much less fanaticism. While perspective for many people comes with age, Korchnoi was still banging his pieces on the board and would give his life for the good cause. Bohm didn’t let him win, but began to focus on witnessing his opponent’s fanaticism and lost.

Viktor the Terrible was a womanizer, and when a stunning beauty once tried to interview him and pass a long waiting line at a signing session, he complied as long as she would join him for a coffee later on. She agreed and posed her first question: “Do you still play chess?” Korchnoi turned his head, growled and his eyes filled with blood. “If you ever want to become good at your job, I suggest you do your homework.” There was no more room for questions and he was even unwilling to hear her voice anymore. She became scared and left in tears. Also at the board, Korchnoi was renowned for his “dirty mouth”, such as his famous attack on Sofia Polgar. Throughout the book, the reader will encounter many more such stories and recollections of people who met and knew Korchnoi.

First Years at the Board

At the end of 1979, a new cycle of candidates matches was about to begin. Besides two players of the younger generation (born around 1950, so this is relative, especially when compared to chess nowadays), the six other candidates were all born in the 1930s (or even in 1929, in Petrosian's case). Why, one might wonder, were all these players the same ones as about twenty years earlier?

Introducing five important Soviet chess stars in a second book on this part of chess history, Andy Soltis sees a pattern. These five – Smyslov, Averbakh, Bronstein, Geller and Taimanov – were born in the early 1920s. The subjects of his previous book had belonged mainly to the 1930s. Soltis sees a relation with the state of the Soviet Union, where relatively good and terribly bad years alternated. All these players were born in “good” years and had a relatively good chance to nourish themselves, while players from other generations suffered much more. It is indeed remarkable how the next Soviet grandmaster to make it to the absolute top was Anatoly Karpov, born in 1951.

This didn't mean – at all – that the lives of these players were beds of roses, indeed their fate was incomparable with the way in which modern top players grow up and live. And this was absolutely the case as well for Viktor Korchnoi. Born in Leningrad on 23 March 1931, he hardly got to know any person from the previous generations. One of his grandparents perished shortly after World War I and another disappeared during it. His remaining paternal grandmother helped raise him during the first ten years of his life. Being of Polish descent, she raised her grandson in her native Polish language.

But let's stick to the chronological development of events. Viktor's – Vitya's – parents were both born around 1910 in Ukraine. His mother, Zelda Gershevna Azbel (named Zhenya by everyone), saw the light of day on 25 December 1909 in Boryspil. Her mother was killed in the Kiev pogroms in 1919, and Zhenya later moved to Leningrad with her father. He died in 1932. Zhenya didn't finish her schooling and was forced, also because of her “eccentric character”, said Korchnoi – to change jobs many times. All of her life, Zhenya lived in utter poverty in communal apartments – she was for years unable to acquire normal furniture and could often be found quarrelling with neighbours. She died in the early 1970s after struggling with cancer for a few years.

Lev Korchnoi was born in 1910 in Karasubazar (nowadays Bilohirsk) and worked his adult life in the confectionary industry. Like that of his future wife, his family suffered from Stalin's disastrous collectivization which had ravaged the Ukrainian part of the empire by the late 1920s, and around 1928 both families settled in Leningrad, where Vitya's parents met. Korchnoi's parents divorced soon after his birth. Initially, he lived with his eccentric mother. Being unable to take care of her child, she returned Viktor to his father (who remarried sometime after his divorce). Complications remained and it was

only after fights before the court that this arrangement became definitive. Lev's mother's family, from Polish nobility, was rich once, but the communists succeeded in their aim to equal all, which left them with hardly anything. Despite these dire circumstances, considerable care was invested in his son's upbringing. Money was spared to allow him to learn German, while the small living space (a room of 4x4 metres for three persons in a communal apartment) breathed culture, with literature available in the family library and reading encouraged. Conversations were also deeper than regular daily matters.

Around the age of six, the boy came into contact with chess. He played with his father and uncle, they played over some games in newspapers, but not much more was done with it. Still, there is testimony of Korchnoi playing in a tournament at the Pioneers Palace even before the war. Leonid [later Eliyahu] Levant recalled their game which he adjourned in a winning position, but when he finished the final session, for which his opponent had carefully prepared, he missed the advantage. After the game ended in a draw, Korchnoi made fun of his older opponent (Levant was three years older), for which he received a slap in the face.

These relatively good and quiet years took a turn for the worse with the outbreak of the Second World War, and most notably when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. In 1941, children were put on the train to travel to safer havens. When she heard about these trains being bombed, Viktor's mother travelled to catch his train up. Three hundred kilometres away she found her son and took him back to Leningrad, where Viktor and his family had to live through the siege. His father and uncle died in the early days of this terrible episode (Lev likely perished after his barge came under bombardment on Lake Ladoga and sank. Korchnoi's uncle, Konstantin, who was born in 1906, was probably shot after stealing a piece of bread), and his grandmother died the following year. She, Elena Alexeevna Korchnaya, left little Vitya "the most wonderful memories": "I lived with her from the age of two. She dressed and undressed me until I learned to do it myself. She taught me to pray before bed; put me to bed, while speaking in Polish. She took me to church where we prayed together. My grandmother was the only person in my circle who did not play chess with me. She did not fight my whims, but she did not indulge them either. The harsh functions of upbringing lay with my father, her son. I was capricious in food – this is not accepted in a poor family. Feeding was one of the duties of Elena Alexeevna, my grandmother. She bought food and cooked on a kerosene stove in the room: the only kitchen in a 13-room communal apartment was 80 meters along a dark corridor. And my father had to fight my whims at the table..."

Korchnoi was told that his paternal grandfather and Elena Alexeevna's husband Merkury Korchnoi disappeared during the First World War, and this is what he wrote in his autobiography. Just recently Korchnoi's son Igor found information on a website dedicated to victims of Soviet repression referring to a Merkury Merkurevich Korchnoi born in Simferopol, Crimea, in 1882 who

Game 43

R. Nezhmetdinov – V. Korchnoi

Soviet Championship, Kiev, 1954

King's Indian Attack (A08)

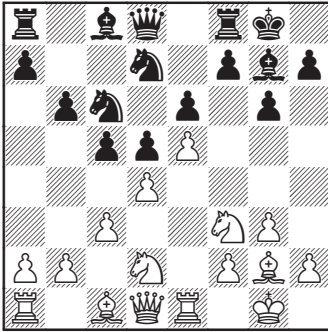
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d3 ♘f6
4.♗bd2 g6 5.g3 ♕g7 6.♕g2 0-0
7.0-0 d5 8.♖e1 e6 9.c3 b6?!

This move is a bit unfortunate. I prefer 9...a5!. That pawn will have an unusual function, preventing the knight from staying on b3. After 10.e5 (10.a4 b6) 10...♘d7 11.d4 cxd4 12.cxd4 f6 Black equalises.

10.e5

According to the database this push was a novelty.

10...♘d7 11.d4



11...f6

Korchnoi opens up the centre. After 11...cxd4 12.cxd4 f6 13.exf6 ♖xf6 14.♗b3 a5 15.♕g5 ♖f5 16.♖c1 ♕b7 17.♕f4 White has a clear edge.

12.exf6 ♖xf6 13.♖e2

Nezhmetdinov attacks the e6-pawn.

A few months later Korchnoi repeated this opening and Ciocaltea deviated here with 13.♗f1 cxd4 14.♕g5 ♖f7 (after 14...♖f5 15.cxd4 ♘xd4 16.♗xd4 ♖xf2+ 17.♖h1

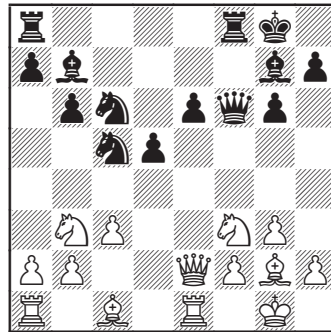
♖xd4 18.♖xe6 ♘c5 Black would have an advantage) 15.cxd4 (15.♕f4!! h6 (15...dxc3 16.♗g5) 16.cxd4 g5 17.♕e3 and White would be better) 15...♗xd4 16.♗xd4 ♖xf2+ 17.♖h1 ♖xd4 18.♖xe6. Here Korchnoi could have taken control with 18...♗c5!, Ciocaltea-Korchnoi, Bucharest 1954.

However Korchnoi's opening idea has a hole in it, as White could get a clear advantage with 13.♗b3! and if 13...♕b7 14.♕g5! ♖f5 (14...♖f7 15.♕f4) 15.♕f4 h6 16.♕d6 White wins.

13...♕b7 14.dxc5?!

This careless capture hands Black the initiative. 14.♖xe6+ ♖xe6 15.♖xe6 cxd4 16.cxd4 ♗xd4 would lead to an equal position.

14...♗xc5 15.♗b3



15...♕a6

Black's piece-play is strong. White can still handle it, but must play accurately.

16.♖e3 ♗e4 17.♗bd2

White can try to get rid of the e4-knight with his other knight as well. After 17.♗fd2 ♖xf2+ (17...♗xf2 18.♖xe6+) 18.♖xf2 ♗xf2 19.♖xe6 ♕c8! 20.♖xc6 ♗h3+ 21.♖h1 (21.♕xh3? ♕xh3 and Black incredibly

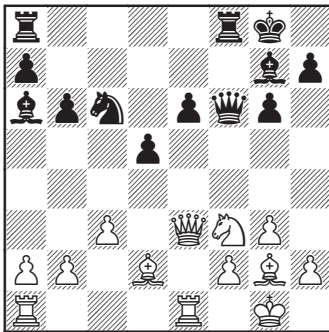
wins) 21...♖f2+ Black has perpetual check.

17...♘c5 18.♘b3 ♘e4 19.♘bd2
♘xd2

Korchnoi avoids a repetition.

20.♙xd2?

This natural move is a big mistake. Taking with the queen 20.♚xd2! would lead to equality, as Black would not be able to mobilise the central pawns. 20...♗ae8 (20...h6 21.♚f4) and the position would be balanced after 21.♚f4 or 21.♚d1.



20...e5!

After this push Black's central pawns somewhat surprisingly become irresistible. White can't prevent e4.

21.♘g5 ♗ad8

21...e4 22.♚f4 h6 23.♚xf6 ♗xf6
24.♘h3 g5 would win as well.

22.f4?!

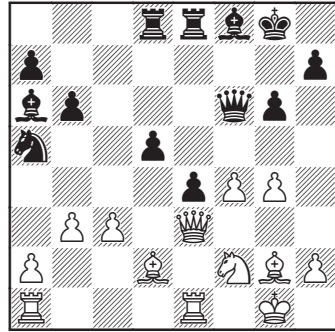
Nezhmetdinov was famous for his attacking skills, but defence was not his strong point. We can see it in this game as well. Still, after the better 22.♚f3 ♚d6 23.♚g4 ♙c8 24.♚a4 h6 25.♘f3 ♗f7 26.♙e3 e4 27.♘d4 ♘e5 Black is close to winning.

22...e4 23.♘h3 ♗fe8 24.♘f2 ♘a5

24...♚f7 25.♗ad1 d4 would be lethal.

25.b3 ♙f8 26.g4?

Nezhmetdinov's move loses a piece for nothing. Instead, 26.♘g4 ♚e6 27.f5 gxf5 28.♚g5+ ♙g7 29.♘e3 would give White a bit of hope to survive.



26...♙c5 27.♚g3 e3 28.♗xe3
♙xe3 White resigns.

Averbakh drew his game in the seventeenth round, but Korchnoi, playing Black against Georgy Lisitsin, fared even worse. Lisitsin, by now a veteran, excelled in this tournament but he also received a warning from the arbiters for "his constant adjusting of the pieces which interrupted his opponents' concentration." Korchnoi's reckless style from the early stage of the game onwards didn't have the wished-for impact on his opponent, though: Lisitsin quickly got a significant positional advantage and repulsed Korchnoi's attempts at complications – forcing him to resign.

The penultimate round saw Averbakh beat Bannik while Korchnoi only drew with a solid Kholmov. As a result, Averbakh accumulated an advantage of a point and a half and

That game from round ten, against Taimanov, also ended badly. Korchnoi's aggressive play was met with a strong defence and the endgame turned against him. Then, Korchnoi proved once more that he was perfectly capable of dealing with Tal's magic: "Already in the opening, Tal boldly sacrificed two pawns and achieved an active arrangement of pieces. Korchnoi played equally ingeniously and with a cunning manoeuvre on the kingside eliminated White's attack. A position was created in which it was unprofitable for the opponents to avoid a repetition of moves. Tal, however, was unexpectedly tempted by a combination that turned out to be erroneous. White resigned on the 35th move."

Game 76

M. Tal – V. Korchnoi

Soviet Championship, Riga, 1958

French Defence (C18)

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5

Korchnoi earlier always played 4...b6, so he had surely prepared deeply the text for this game. In the 17th round he would play 4...♘e7.

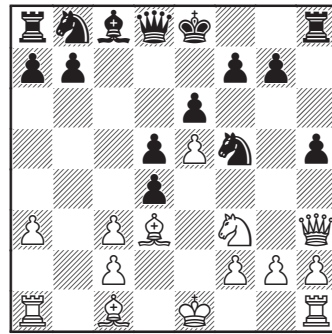
He mainly resorted to the French Defence in this championship, but he deployed a Sicilian once and e5 leading to a Ruy Lopez in another game. His devotion to preparing the opening was always exemplary. His round 17 game continued: 5.♚g4 ♘f5 6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.♙b5 ♙d7 8.♙g5 h5 9.♚xf5 exf5 10.♙xd8 ♘xd8 11.♙d3 c6 12.h4 g6 13.a3 ♙e7 14.♘e2 ♘e6 15.g3 0-0 16.♚d2 c5 17.♘f4 ♘xf4 18.gxf4 c4 19.♙e2 b5 20.♚hg1 a5

21.♚e3 b4 22.a4 ♚ac8 23.♘g5 ♚g7 24.♚g3 ♙xg5 25.♚xg5 ♘h6 26.♙f3 ♙e6 27.♚ag1 ♚cd8 28.♚5g3 ♚c8 Draw, Spassky-Korchnoi, Soviet Championship, Riga 1958.

5.a3 ♙xc3+ 6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.♚g4 ♘f5

Korchnoi doesn't want to reach the wild Poisoned Pawn variation.

8.♙d3 h5 9.♚h3 cxd4 10.♘f3



10...♚c7!?

This is Korchnoi's prepared novelty. Kasparov considers it "an important improvement – a gain of tempo." He explains that the queen attacks the c3-pawn and, in particular, the e5-pawn. It also defends the b7-pawn. On 10...dxc3 both 11.g4 or 11.0-0 would give White a playable position. Petrosian played 10...♘c6 in 1957 and lost to Tal after 11.g4 ♘fe7 12.gxh5.

11.♚b1!?

After 11.0-0 dxc3 (11...♘c6?! 12.g4! ♘fe7 13.cxd4) 12.a4 ♘c6 13.♙a3 Black's position would be unpleasant. So we can conclude that Korchnoi's novelty on move 10 was good enough for one game and was playable, as it was not easy to respond, but objectively it was not the best move.

11...dxc3!

After 11...♖c6 12.cxd4 ♘cxd4 13.♗xd4 ♗xd4 14.0-0 White has strong play for the pawn. It is not worth Black losing time on the pawn: 11...♙xc3+? 12.♙d2 ♙c7 and after 13.0-0 or 13.g4 White would be somewhat better.

12.g4?

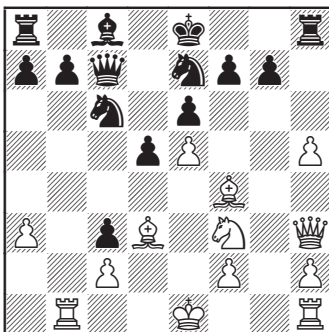
Tal reacts wrongly. White should not assume doubled h-pawns. The position would be balanced after 12.0-0 ♗c6 (12...b6 13.♖d1) 13.♖e1 ♙d7 14.♙g5.

12...♗e7 13.gxh5 ♗bc6

If 13...b6! 14.♖g1 (14.♙b5+ ♙d7) 14...♙a6! 15.♙xa6 ♗xa6 16.♖xg7 Black would be clearly better after 16...♗f5 or 16...d4.

14.♙f4?!

Tal follows Keres' recommendation and defends the e5-pawn. However, he should have done so indirectly with 14.♗f1!. White would have a somewhat preferable position after 14...♙d7 15.♖g1 ♖g8 16.♙h7 or 14...♗f5 15.♖g1, but not 14...♗g6?? as 15.♙g4 would win. On the other hand, 14.♙g3? is wrong, as after 14...♖xh5 15.♙xg7 ♗xe5 16.♗g5 ♗xd3+ 17.cxd3 ♗g6 Black would have an advantage according to Korchnoi.



14...♗g6!

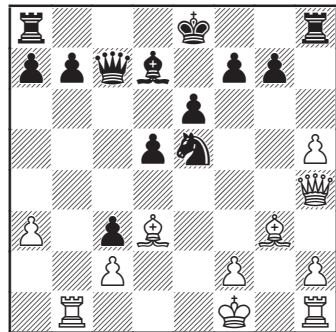
Korchnoi plays his prepared move, which was missed by Keres. Viktor aims to win the e5-pawn.

15.♙g3 ♗gx5 16.♗xe5

“White incorrectly restricts his own possibilities. The critical continuation was to move the king without exchanging knights – 16 ♗f1,” says Korchnoi. However, he is not right, as Tal’s move is equally playable. After 16.♗f1 ♙d7 (or 16...f6) 17.♖e1 (17.♙b5?? ♙a5! wins) 17...f6 18.♙g6+ ♗e7 19.♗xe5 ♗xe5 20.♗g2 ♙e8 Black has a slight edge.

16...♗xe5 17.♗f1 ♙d7 18.♙h4?

“This move, made with the aim of activating his queen, is a serious mistake, which should have led to a difficult position for White,” Korchnoi writes. This time Viktor is correct. After 18.♖e1 f6 19.♙g6+ the position would be balanced.



18...f6?

Korchnoi misses a chance to finish the game, as 18...♗f3! 19.♙g4 (19. ♙b4 ♙c6) 19...♗d2+ 20.♗e2 e5 would win.

19.♙xe5!

Tal grabs the chance to get back into the game.

19...♙xe5

19...fxe5 20.♙g6+ ♔f8 21.♖b4+ ♙g8 22.♖xb7! would be equal as well.

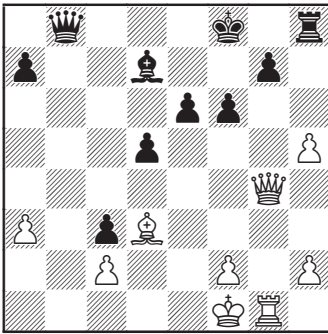
20.♖xb7 ♖b8

Korchnoi exchanges Tal's active rook. He attached an only move sign to it, but Black has another playable move: 20...♙c6 21.♖g1 d4 (21...♙xb7?? 22.♖a4+) 22.♖gxg7 ♙xb7 23.♙g6+ ♔d8 24.♖xb7 ♙c8 25.♖b4 and the position is balanced.

21.♖xb8+ ♖xb8 22.♖g4

22.♖g1?? loses to 22...g5.

22...♙f8 23.♖g1



23...g5!

"The only defence, but a sufficient one. Black returns the last of his extra pawns, but his king finds a safe refuge at g7," notes Korchnoi. If 23...♖g8 then 24.h6 g5 25.h4 wins.

24.hxg6

After 24.h4? ♖f4 25.hxg5 ♖xg4 26.♖xg4 e5 27.♖b4 ♖xh5 White would struggle.

24...♙f8 25.h4 a5

"A useful prophylactic move, preventing the possible intrusion of the White queen into Black's position via b4. Now Black must be constantly on the watch to safeguard his position against

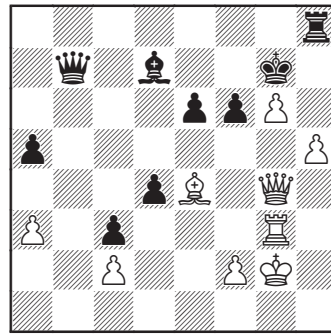
penetration by the White queen." (Korchnoi.)

26.♖g3 ♖b1+ 27.♙g2 ♖b7 28.h5 d4+

On 28...e5!? 29.♙f5 would be played.

29.♙e4

If 29.f3 ♖d5 30.♖h3 e5 31.♙f5 ♙xf5 32.♖xf5 the position would be equal after 32...♖d6 or 32...d3.



29...♙c6

Korchnoi thought his move was a mistake, but he has nothing better. If 29...♖b5 30.♖h3 ♖g5 Korchnoi evaluated the position as better for Black, but after 31.♖xg5 fxg5 32.♖h1 ♙b5 33.♙f3 it would be equal.

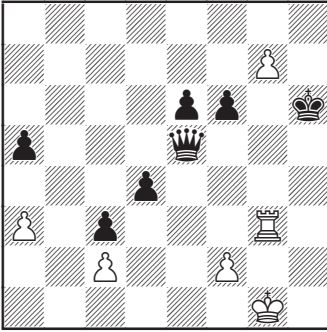
30.♙xc6 ♖xc6+ 31.♙g1

The position has settled into an endgame where no side can progress.

31...♖d5 32.♖f4 ♖e5 33.h6+?

Tal blunders the game. Perhaps Korchnoi was short of time and Tal got carried away. If 33.♖f3! then 33...♖d5 is the only move. White could then transpose to an equal rook ending with 34.♖xd5 or repeat moves with 34.♖f4.

33...♖xh6 34.♖xh6+ ♙xh6 35.g7



35... ♖xg3+ 0-1.

“By no means faultless, but a very sharp game, and also interesting from the theoretical point of view.” (Korchnoi.) It was more Tal’s loss than Korchnoi’s win. Tal went on to win the championship anyway, losing only one other game, to Boleslavsky.

After drawing with Polugaevsky, Korchnoi scored a fascinating win against Geller. The initial moves of the Chigorin Defence in the Ruy Lopez were as usual rattled off in a minute, but then Geller spent his entire thinking time on how to deal with the rare 15. ♗d2 and 16.b4, which Korchnoi selected. Geller defended brilliantly and achieved equality but, in a cruel time trouble phase, he made several inaccurate moves which Korchnoi succeeded in exploiting. Geller failed to make the time limit, which occurred only very rarely, and this inflicted the Odessite’s first loss.

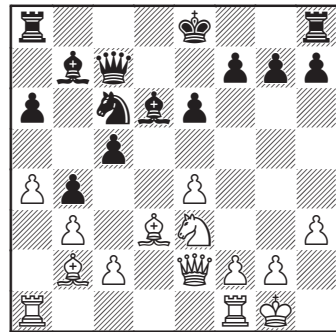
In round thirteen, Korchnoi received a point due to Borisenko’s withdrawal earlier in the tournament. Furman was next. He selected the Sicilian and had to endure an attack, but Korchnoi didn’t get any further than an equal endgame. In round

15, with Black against Krogius, Korchnoi himself selected the Sicilian, specifically the Kan Variation, though he didn’t “especially trust this opening variation.” A fascinating struggle arose, where Korchnoi made the rare decision to castle long. He reached an endgame having given up a piece for pawns, which he succeeded in winning.

Game 77

N. Krogius – V. Korchnoi

Soviet Championship, Riga, 1958



15... ♗e5

Korchnoi neutralises White’s bishop on the long diagonal.

16. ♗xe5 ♖xe5 17.f4 ♖c6?

After 17... ♖xd3! 18.cxd3 0-0-0 the position is complex and more or less balanced.

18.e5?!

Moving the queen to h5 at once with 18. ♖h5! would be much better, as the queen would attack the c5-pawn. After 18... ♖d4 (18... 0-0-0? 19. ♖xc5 wins or if 18... ♖e7 then 19.f5! would be very strong) 19.f5 0-0-0 (19...e5 20. ♗c4) 20.fxe6 g6 (20...fxe6 21. ♖f7 wins) 21. ♖g5 fxe6 22. ♖c4 White’s advantage is close to winning.

18... ♖d4 19. ♖h5