

Selected Games

Peter Romanovsky

Selected Games

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Front cover Leningrad, Uritsky Square, 20th July 1924. A “living chess” game between Peter Romanovsky (in the photo) and Ilya Rabinovich.

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*Peter Romanovsky after graduating
from realschule*

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Part 1

The Biography of Peter Romanovsky, by Sergei Tkachenko

“One of the most oft-quoted records of the siege, scribbled in pencil over the pages of a pocket address book, is that kept by twelve-year-old Tanya Savicheva: 28 December 1941 at 12.30 a.m. – Zhenya died. 25 January 1942 at 3 p.m. – Granny died. 17 March at 5 a.m. – Lyoka died. 13 April at 2 a.m. – Uncle Vasya died. 10 May at 4 p.m. – Uncle Lyosha died. 13 May at 7.30 a.m. – Mama died. The Savichevs are dead. Everyone is dead. Only Tanya is left.”

Anna Reid, *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941-1944*

We Do Not Forget Our Heroes!

While digging through the dusty archives, my conviction grew even stronger that life sometimes writes tragedies and dramas that are far more captivating than any stories made up by human authors. The biography of the chess great Peter Arsenyevich Romanovsky is one such story. His life history is just begging for a movie adaptation. And, believe me, this would be an awesome film, worthy of an Academy Award.

Consider this: Romanovsky bore witness to the twilight of the great Mikhail Chigorin’s era and the formative years of the famous St. Petersburg chess community. As a student, Peter took part in the Mannheim super-tournament, which ended as World War I began. After years as a prisoner of war, he returned to what was now called Petrograd, torn apart by revolutionary fervor. He was “lucky” to live in an epoch of dramatic changes, see the collapse of the Russian Empire and partake in all the “joys” of the transitional period: war, famine, devastation...

Peter Romanovsky wasn’t just one of the founders of the Soviet chess school: he was its cornerstone. At the peak of his playing power, Romanovsky was one of the world’s strongest dozen players.

He was the first Soviet chess player to earn the master’s title and twice won the country’s championship. He was the first chess player to receive the title of Distinguished Master of Sports. It was only because of his prickly personality and Caissa’s whims that he didn’t become the first Soviet grandmaster as well.

The first Soviet chess periodical came to be because of his efforts. In addition to playing in tournaments and matches, he devoted much time to coaching. There are famous grandmasters and masters among his pupils, including Averbakh, Zak, Alatortsev, Lisitsin, Chekhover, Shamaev, Ragozin,

Gotthilf, Sokolsky, Ravinsky and Savitsky. Even Mikhail Botvinnik, the first Soviet world chess champion, matured and grew stronger with his help.

Peter Romanovsky's teaching talent, demonstrated in numerous articles, lectures and books, lured several generations of boys and girls into the chess kingdom. He published 16 books in his lifetime. However, as you will discover on these pages, his was a life cursed with tragedy.

Unfortunately, time flies, and it "airbrushes" the great chess personalities. We start forgetting them, or remember them only on important dates. That's why such books are written – so that these heroes can live on in memories and games. I hope that this work will serve that noble cause as well!

Finally, I would gratefully like to acknowledge the help of Peter's son Viktor Petrovich Romanovsky, who lives in Moscow, in preparing this work.

The Sacrament of Birth and First Chess Steps

If we believe the Internet, Peter Arsenyevich Romanovsky was born on 17th (29th New Style) July 1892 in St. Petersburg. But this cannot be taken for a fact!

Thanks to the efforts of the St. Petersburg chess historian Alexander Kentler published on the e3e5.com website, we managed to discover some details of Peter Romanovsky's first days on Earth. He published a document that mentions his parents as well. Let's quote this certificate in its entirety:

"By decree of His Imperial Highness, this certificate is issued by the Tver Spiritual Consistory, with the government seal included, confirming that the following record exists in the first part of the Register of Births for the year One Thousand Eight Hundred Ninety Two in the Holy Mother of the Nativity Church on Isaevets Brook in Tver, record number 17:

Born on 17th July, baptized as Peter on 25th August; his parents: Junior Controller serving in His Imperial Majesty's Office for Empress Maria's Institutions, Court Councilor Arseny Yakovlev (*they meant "Yakovlevich"*) Romanovsky and his lawful wife Maria Alexandrovna, both Orthodox Christian; godparents: graduate of Tver Classical Grammar School Pavel Alexandrov Kazansky, and wife of the priest of Rybatskoe village, St. Petersburg governorship and district, Elena Vasilyeva Slavnitiskaya; the sacrament of baptism was performed by priest Arseny Sokolov and deacon Innokenty Vyakhirev. Stamp duty paid on 28 May of the year 1903.

Archpriest Obraztsov, Consistory member
Secretary: (signature unreadable)
Chief clerk P. Spasky."



The Holy Mother of the Nativity Church on Isaevets Brook in Tver, taken from the hram-tver.ru website. It was destroyed in 1930 according to Kentler

From Alexander Kentler's articles, we know that Peter Romanovsky's father, Arseny Yakovlevich Romanovsky, graduated from the Theological Academy and enrolled in the Tver Seminary. After graduating from the seminary in 1873, Arseny Romanovsky served as a priest in the Stariy Pogost village of the Tver district. Then he studied law at St. Petersburg University. In 1890, one year after graduating, Romanovsky's father defended his post-graduate (candidate's) thesis. Romanovsky-senior retired as a state councilor, decorated with four orders and two medals and a stipend of 3,500 rubles per year.

Kentler also managed to trace the lineage of Peter Romanovsky. It turns out that in addition to his father, his great-grandfather, grandfather and uncle were also priests!

The historian writes the following about Romanovsky's birthplace: "Most likely, Peter Arsenyevich was born in Stariy Pogost, and baptized in Tver when he was 40 days old. Another possibility is that Arseny Yakovlevich, who already served in St. Petersburg, sent his wife home to give birth." Viktor, Romanovsky's son, told the publisher of this book that Kentler's information was the most likely version, and he didn't have additional knowledge.

Peter was the seventh son in his family. Another boy was born after him. Today's parents will probably be shocked by this number: how do you feed,

clothe and educate such a vast number of kids? But in the old times, big families were common, especially in the country. The more kids you had, the more help you got about the household!

Chess historian Isaak Romanov, who knew Romanovsky well, described the family's chess atmosphere in his book *Peter Romanovsky (Fizkultura i Sport, 1984, Russian language)*: "Peter grew up in a house where everyone, from the oldest to the youngest, loved chess. Maria Alexandrovna didn't just encourage the children's passion: she took part in the home battles as well." Romanovsky himself wrote about chess as his childhood passion in his memoir (see Part 2 of this book).

In 1906, the All-Russian Tournament was held in St. Petersburg, with his idol, Mikhail Ivanovich Chigorin, taking part. His older brother, Alexander Romanovsky, played too, sharing 6th and 7th prize. After each round, Alexander showed the games to his younger brother and described the tournament's events.

Unfortunately, this tournament was marred by a huge scandal. After an incident in round 4, Chigorin dropped out. The reason for this was the tournament committee's decision to award a win to Stefan Izbinsky in his game against Chigorin because of the latter's loss on time. This controversial decision was made retroactively by the arbiters, after the actual game ended with Izbinsky resigning in a hopeless position. Later, it was determined that the clock was faulty, more than five minutes fast. Chigorin's appeal to reverse the decision was rejected, so the maestro walked out. This was despite the fact that Izbinsky thought that the committee's verdict was wrong and he was ready to accept his defeat.

After this incident, Alexander took his younger brother to the tournament. Romanovsky would recall his feelings about this chess feast in future lectures and meetings:

"I was very upset that I wouldn't see Chigorin play, and my interest in the tournament dropped sharply. At the time, high school students weren't allowed to visit clubs and other public places in the evening. So, I had to take off my school uniform and don casual clothes to go and watch the chess...

The round was over. The barriers were removed, and the spectators sat down around the tables, discussing the finished games with the players. Grigory Gelbak and my brother also started their post-mortem.

Then a group of people entered the hall, headed by a tournament committee member, the well-known chess patron N. Saburov. The hall suddenly fell silent. Whispers rustled like the wind, 'Chigorin!' And until the group entered the adjacent hall, everyone's eyes followed him...



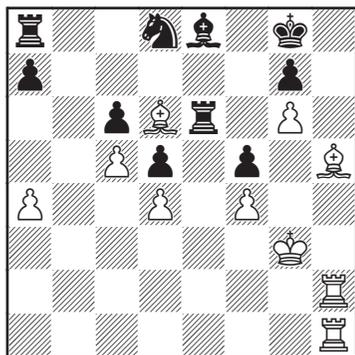
*Participants of the 1906 All-Russian Tournament in St. Petersburg
Duz-Khotimirsky, Omelyansky, Izbinsky, Malyutin, Alapin, Alexander Romanovsky,
Saburov (member of the organizing committee) Talvik, N. Znosko-Borovsky
(member of the organizing committee), Blumenfeld, S. Znosko-Borovsky (member of
the organizing committee), Evtifiev, Salwe, E. Znosko-Borovsky, Rubinstein*

Half an hour later, Chigorin again appeared in the hall, alone this time. Gelbak rushed up to him and asked him to look at his game against A. Romanovsky...”

This “look” lasted for almost an hour! Peter sat beside Chigorin this whole time, watching his analysis and severe criticism of the “creativity” of both players. Peter’s older brother bore the brunt of this criticism – he had failed to convert a large positional advantage. This was his first and only meeting with his idol. (*Shakhmaty v SSSR*, No. 5, 1959)

Choosing an Occupation and a Hobby

Peter did not continue the dynasty of Russian Orthodox priests. He enrolled in the private Realschule in St. Petersburg upon reaching the entry age. This school opened in 1900, with state councilor A. K. Kopylov as its honorary trustee. It closed in 1913, but by that time Peter had already been studying in the shipbuilding faculty of the Polytechnic Institute for two years. Shipbuilding probably didn’t seem too exciting for the young man, though, so he transferred to the electrical engineering faculty of the same institute that same year.



47. ♖g4!

Only this way, as there is no allowing Black to take the g6-pawn with check. Taking without check leads to mate after 47... ♖xg6 48. ♖h8+ ♔f7 49. ♖f8+ ♔e6 50. ♖e1+ or ♖xe8+.

47... ♖e3+ 48. ♔f2 ♖xg6
49. ♖h8+ ♔f7 50. ♖f8+ ♔e6
51. ♔xe3 fxg4 52. ♖hh8

Black resigned.

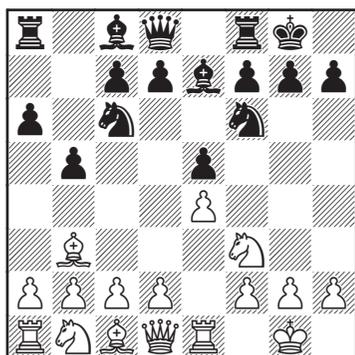
Black drops a piece to 52... ♔d7 53. f5 ♖f7 54. ♖xf7+.

No. 27, Romanovsky – Torre, 1925

Moscow International Tournament

Ruy Lopez

1. e4 e5 2. ♖f3 ♘c6 3. ♖b5 a6
4. ♖a4 ♞f6 5. 0-0 ♖e7 6. ♖e1 b5
7. ♖b3 0-0



Black has the clear intention of meeting White's mainline theory 8.c3 with the gambit line: 8...d5 9.exd5 ♞xd5 10. ♞xe5, etc. Back then, the whole line was relatively underexplored. Many a theoretician held to the opinion that this unsubstantiated pawn sac by Black required much defensive precision from White. I had neither prior knowledge nor anything home-prepared to show for this line. The first question that puzzled me here was the worthwhileness of entering uncharted territory that could have been investigated by my young but extremely formidable opponent. With 8.5 points out of 12, master Carlos Torre was then one of the tournament leaders. In the previous round, he had defeated Emanuel Lasker through a nice combination. Besides, he had asserted himself as a very enterprising and inventive player. My better judgment warned me against going for the gambit line. However, a humble refusal to accept the sacrifice would be akin to a psychological surrender that could weigh heavily on my follow-up play.

It also brought up the need to find a way to decline the sacrifice and maintain the initiative at the same time.

The now frequently employed 8.d4 was then considered unsatisfactory because of 8...♞xd4. The combination 9. ♖xf7+ ♖xf7 10. ♞xe5 ♞c6 11. ♞xf7 ♔xf7 12. e5 (followed by ♗d5+) was not yet

discovered back then. 8.d3 would have been very passive. Thus, a process of elimination led me to 8.a4. In admitting that this new move caught him off guard after the game, Torre thus gave a stamp of approval to the main point of my reasoning, at least partially.

Instead of the underwhelming 10...♞c6?, Black should have gone for 10...♞f8!, and after 11.♞xd4 c5 12.♞d1 ♠b7 13.♞c3 ♞c7 or 13...b4 his chances are not inferior.

8.a4 b4

The modern opening manuals highlight 8...♠b7. Of all moves, it allows White to blunt the scope of Black's light-squared bishop via 9.d3.

9.d4 d6 10.h3

Maintaining the central tension, which White was after to complicate the game, requires that White prevent ♠c8-g4 by all means.

10...♞xd4

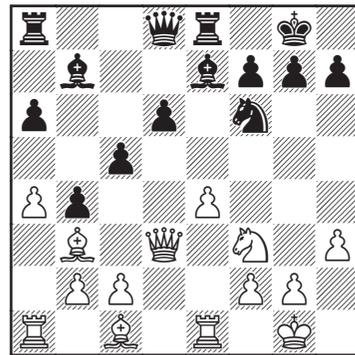
Black conceives a sharp plan to besiege the e4-pawn, as you will see from the follow-up to this move. A more conservative but less promising plan had to do with placing positional pressure against the e4-pawn via ♞f6-d7 and ♠f6. In this case, Black would have had to play ♞b8 first to sidestep the knight pin after ♠b3-d5.

11.♞xd4 exd4 12.♞xd4 c5 13.♞d3 ♠b7 14.♞d2 ♞e8

Black is consistent in putting pressure on the opponent's center. The following continuation was

neither in Torre's style nor in his best interests: 14...d5 15.exd5 ♞xd5 16.♞e4 (however, 16.♠xd5 ♠xd5 17.♞xe7 ♞xe7 18.♞xd5 ♞ad8, followed by ♞e1+, would be an error playing into Black's hands) 16...♞f6 17.♞xd8 ♞axd8 18.♞g3 ♞fe8 19.♞f5 ♠f8 20.♠g5, and White retains the initiative.

15.♞f3



15...♠f8

Having spent much time over this move, I concluded that it would bring Black no dividends because of a potential attack involving e4-e5. When Torre did play 15...♠f8, I grew slightly alarmed for fear of having missed something in my calculations.

As it turned out later, Torre overlooked my 18th move, which, of course, went a long way to making White's offensive easier.

How come such a prominent tactician as Torre paid no heed to White's response, which can hardly be qualified as a deeply-hidden one?

A number of tournament correspondents voiced an opinion

that the young Mexican, exhausted by two preceding games with Capablanca and Lasker, had no firepower left to match me.

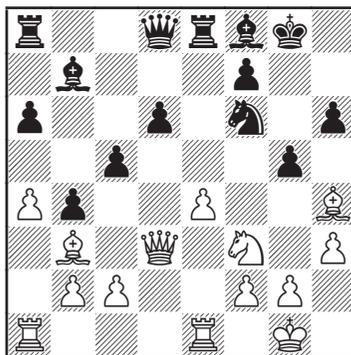
In my opinion, that explanation is incorrect. We can arguably attribute the error to purely individual features of Torre's play, such as his distaste for defensive duties. Torre used to fall into a state of confusion whenever the initiative passed to his opponents. Gifted with an excellent tactical vision and superb imagination when in attack, he would always underestimate the opponent's potential tactics.

Torre's performance was up and down, subject to demoralization by failures. He won only once in the last eight rounds after his defeat by me (+1 -2 = 5).

This helps explain his sheer stubbornness in refusing to accept being on the back foot against me when he needed to switch to defensive mode. This lack of comprehension, or, rather, reluctance to accept the situation for what it was, sets the stage for overlooking the "unexpected".

15...h6 16.♔f4 ♕f8 17.e5 (or 16.e5!? *immediately*) would be no better than that as White gets a dangerous attack against the f7-pawn. After 15...d5 16.exd5 ♕xd5 (if 16...♘xd5, then 17.♔g5! ♕xg5 18.♖xe8+ ♗xe8 19.♘g5, and winning) 17.♔f4 ♕xb3 18.♗xb3 ♗d5 19.♖ad1 ♗xb3 20.cxb3 Black is worse, but could still put up stubborn resistance.

16.♔g5 h6 17.♔h4 g5



18.e5!

This move produced a bombshell effect on Torre, and his array of facial expressions betrayed a sense of bewilderment overwhelming him.

Black was counting on 18.♘xg5 hxg5 19.♔xg5 ♕g7, and he would be on a good way to repelling the attack while ending up a piece to the good. *For example, 20.♗g3 ♖xe4!*

18...d5

In such positions, where the forced lines rule, you can usually find the lesser evil. However, completely demoralized by the course of events, Torre was not up to the task at all. The defense of his choice fails in a short while. After 18...dxe5 19.♗g6+ ♖h8 20.♔xf7 ♕xf3 (20...gxh4? 21.♖ad1) 21.♔xg5 hxg5 22.gxf3 or 18...♔xf3 19.♗xf3 dxe5 (19...gxh4? 20.exf6 ♖xe1+ 21.♖xe1 ♖c8 22.♗g4+, followed by ♕xf7) 20.♖ad1 ♗e7 21.♔g3 e4 22.♗f5 White is only slightly better.

18...c4! 19.♔xc4 d5 20.♔b3 ♘e4 21.♔g3 was the best defense. The

knight's strong position rewards Black for the missing pawn to a certain degree. 18...gxh4 19.♖g6+ ♔h8 20.♙xf7 ♙g7 21.exf6 ♖xe1+ and 22...♗xf6 was also stronger than the text.

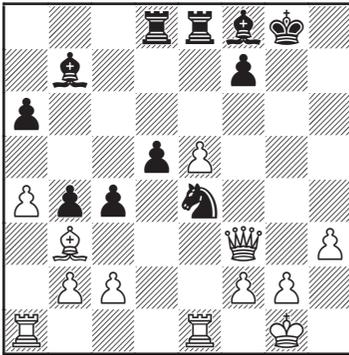
19.♘g5 hxg5 20.♙xg5 c4
21.♗f3

This is the game decider. 21...cxb3 is met with 22.♙xf6 ♗d7 23.♗h5 ♙g7 24.♗g5. When the opportunity presents itself, apart from ♙xf6 White also threatens ♙xc4, which may follow after 21...♖e6, among other moves.

21...♘e4

In sacrificing a lot of material Black hopes to stop the opponent's onslaught and buy at least some initiative.

22.♙xd8 ♖axd8



23.♖xe4!

However, this reciprocal piece sacrifice sets play on the right track, as the b3-bishop joins the battle to intensify White's offensive.

23...dxe4 24.♗g3+ ♙g7
25.♙xc4 ♖xe5 26.♖e1 ♔d2

Black could have resigned with a clear conscience here, because he can do nothing to stop White's attack involving ♗f4, followed by ♖e1-e3-g3.

27.♙xf7+ ♔f8 28.♗f4 e3
29.♖xe3 ♖xe3 30.fxe3 ♔e7
31.♗xb4+

Black resigned.

No. 28, Romanovsky – Vilner, 1925

4th RSFSR (Soviet) Championship,

Leningrad

King's Indian Defense

1.♘f3 g6 2.e4 ♙g7

Black plays what could instead be called an Unorthodox Opening, as it poses significant challenges to the rapid development of his pieces, one of the fundamental classical postulates.

Piece harmony is not achieved easily in this opening either, which contradicts yet another classical principle: to achieve as much coordination of your pieces as possible.

3.♙c4 d6 4.0-0

