

The Livonian Knight

Selected Games of Alvis Vitolins

Zigurds Lanka, Edvins Kengis,
Janis Klovans and Janis Vitomskis

The Livonian Knight: Selected Games of Alvis Vitolins
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Foreword to the English edition – True chess has no limits!

Albert Einstein once said that imagination was more important than knowledge. These words often come to mind when you play through the games of Alvis Vitolins: even in our computer time, his breathtaking ideas and incredible opening discoveries still look amazing.

I once faced Alvis over the board in Leningrad, but we really got to know each other in the late 1960s in Latvia. Back then, I regularly traveled to Latvia to work with Tal. Several times, a tall young man showed up at 34 Valdemar (then Gorky) Street, the apartment building where Misha used to live and which now bears a memorial plaque for the great champion. Vitolins's appearance and gait looked somewhat similar to Bobby Fischer's. Tal had a plus score in the endless blitz games they played, but Alvis still managed to beat his famous opponent numerous times, usually with quick, crushing attacks worthy of Tal himself. Vitolins was a brilliant blitz player, able to defeat anyone when he was in the mood.

As I watched the games, I saw exactly what Tal meant when, during analysis, he would sacrifice material for an initiative and, rubbing his hands together, said, "And now, let's play like Vitolins..."

Alvis became a master at the age of 16 – very early by that time's standards. His former rivals, now grizzled veterans, remember Vitolins as one of the most talented players of that 1960s generation. All of them said that Alvis loved chess with all his heart and had a very unique, different understanding of the game.

The Latvian master's motto was "The initiative, by any means necessary!" He created positions where two or even one pawn were sufficient compensation for a piece, because the remaining pieces became fiercely active. He would get the absolute maximum out of these pieces, and such sacrifices were often followed by the most amazing events. His opponent's numerically superior forces suddenly turned sluggish and uncoordinated, while Vitolins's attacks grew stronger with every move.

The opponent's king was often the main target of the aggression, but Vitolins's main goal for these sacrifices was to make his pieces as energetic as possible. A quarter of a century later, another Latvian player, Alexei Shirov, embraced a similar approach to chess.

Even though everyone agreed that Vitolins's chess potential was enormous, the Latvian master didn't managed to fully realize it. His mind overflowed with ideas, and so in classical play Alvis could become fascinated with a spectacular move, a pretty, tempting, but not entirely correct combination,

and... could lose control over the game. Competition in Soviet chess was enormous, and such disregard for practicality and pragmatism was severely punished by opponents, so Alvis never managed to become a grandmaster.

Moreover, you could count the international tournaments he took part in (all of them inside the Soviet Union) on the fingers of one hand. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the borders were finally opened and you could freely travel abroad, he played in some open tournaments in Germany, but his best years were already behind him. Still, Vitolins shone in his native Latvia: he won seven Latvian championships and several Baltic states tournaments.

This is the outline of Alvis Vitolins's sporting biography. Actually, he didn't have any other biography, any other life besides that involving games, tournaments and endless analytical work.

Time was never of any importance to him; the reward for the hours, days, sleepless nights he spent on analysis was the very process of being immersed in his favorite game, rather than prizes, titles or rating points. Vitolins was a brilliant player, but most of all, Alvis was a tireless researcher of the game. If we use Botvinnik's scale, separating all the players into researchers and performers, then Alvis Vitolins belongs to the first group, there is no doubt about that.

He left a mark on many opening breakthroughs, and he even made many of those breakthroughs himself. Even though some lines he analyzed now look naive or even not fully correct, after being tested by time and computers, this shouldn't perturb the reader. It never bothered Alvis.

Vitolins, publishing an article on theory in *New In Chess* magazine, concluded: "My experience as a chess analyst tells me that any, even the most thorough, analysis may have certain flaws. I just want to point out to the reader that even in a seemingly worn-out variation completely new ideas can be found. True chess has no limits!"

Vitolins's ideas permeated many openings, but the Sicilian Defense was the main playground for his experiments: he was a true idea generator here. His favorite squares for bishops in this opening were b5 and g5, and the bishop would often move to b5 despite a pawn already standing on a6. He would unfold the position like a paper fan, often placing his knights on d5, f5 or e6, under attack from opposing pawns. Tal sacrificed quite a few pieces on the same squares, often following Vitolins's recommendations and successfully employing his ideas in his own games.

The history of chess in the 20th century is mainly the history of world championship matches, elite tournaments, titles, rankings, victories. But chess history consists not only of marshals and generals. Chess has a place for every good master, and true game connoisseurs respect them no less than the

most famous players. Alvis Vitolins is among those obscure names that are now returned to chess fans.

The authors of the book, Vitolins's compatriots, had first-hand knowledge of his mastery, imagination and analytical prowess. With their book they have made it available for every one of us. I'm sure that this book, which covers the diversity of the outstanding Latvian master's creativity, will be greatly enjoyed not only by anyone looking to improve their chess, but also by everyone who loves our game.

Genna Sosonko, Amsterdam, March 2021¹

¹ See Genna Sosonko's book *Russian Silhouettes* (New In Chess) for a detailed biographical essay on Alvis Vitolins

Foreword by the Authors

This book is dedicated to one of Latvia's greatest players; his name is well-known in Latvia and the former Soviet Union, but has remained relatively obscure in the West – except maybe to Cochrane Gambit fans. Ten years have passed since Alvis Vitolins's death, and many players of the new generation don't know anything about this unusual maestro...

The goal of this book is to remind those who started to forget about the existence of this outstanding master and show Vitolins's achievements to those who'd never heard about one of Latvia's most original players. His ingenious opening ideas and creative, uncompromising play must be preserved for future generations of chess fans.

Carnikava, Vitolins's native town, has been hosting Alvis Vitolins Memorials for ten years now. There's a memorial plaque on the building where Alvis, the multiple-time champion of Latvia, was born.

Alvis won many important games in his life, but his contributions to chess theory should be especially celebrated. So, the concept of a book about Vitolins's legacy was there for a while, but it took time for his contemporaries to agree to produce a work together. The vision for the book was unclear for some time, but the authors ultimately decided to select games where Alvis Vitolins tested his new opening ideas. Thus, we organized and evaluated Vitolins's contributions to opening theory.

Our intentions were also hampered by uncertainty in funding. Ultimately, we decided to contact the Carnikava city council, which organizes the annual Alvis Vitolins Memorial and installed the memorial plaque. The city council chairwoman, Mrs. E. Sloceniece, immediately pledged her support for our project.

We, the authors of this book on Alvis Vitolins, would like to thank the Carnikava city council and, especially, Ms. Sloceniece for their understanding and support for our project.



The chess community praises the great contribution of Carnikava city council in preserving Vitolins's legacy. This year, the Carnikava Culture House hosted the tenth Alvis Vitolins Memorial – an event that attracts a lot of players from all parts of Latvia. The amazing atmosphere of the tournament inspires players to engage in intense battles, and the generous prize fund provided by Carnikava leaves the winners happy. Master Arnolds Luckans, Alvis's former pupil, regularly plays in the tournament. This year, the tournament was won by one of the authors of this book, grandmaster Zigurds Lanka. We can only hope that this popular tournament will remain a tradition in the future.

Zigurds Lanka, Edvins Kengis, Janis Klovans and Janis Vitomskis,
Riga, July 2007

Introduction – An Innovator and Pioneer

What's the good of reaching 90, if you waste 89?

Elvis Aaron Presley

Alvis Vitolins was born on 15th June 1946 in Sigulda. He learned to play chess at the age of six and immediately fell in love with the game, which became his life's work. At the age of 15, Vitolins became a Candidate Master, and then, a year later, earned his master's title. In 1963, the young Latvian talent won the USSR Youth Championship. His contemporaries and chess coaches who watched him play predicted a bright future for the young player. Even back then, Vitolins's play was fresh and sharp, he was a master of the initiative, and his energetic attacks were difficult to repel. Alvis was very effective with the white pieces, and he always performed well in team competitions where the captain trusted him with white.



No. 1

A. Vitolins – U. Vaskans

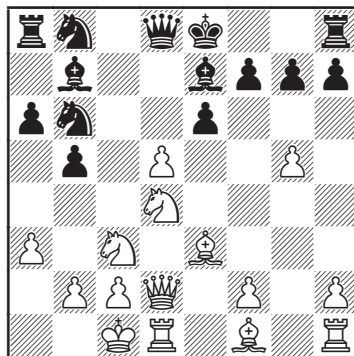
Sicilian Defense

Latvian Youth Championship 1960

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4
4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 d6 6.♙e3 ♙e7
7.g4!?. Vitolins plays a sharp line similar to the Keres Attack.

7...a6 8.g5 ♗fd7 9.♚d2 b5 10.a3
♙b7 11.0-0 d5? It was better to play 11...♚c7

12.exd5 ♗b6



13.♘dxb5! This was possibly the first known game where Vitolins deployed his favorite sacrifice on b5.

You'll find several variations on that theme in other parts of this book.

13...♖xd5

After 13...axb5 14.♙xb5+ black can't save the game:

14...♗8d7 15.dxe6 fxe6
16.♙xb6+-

14...♙f8 15.d6+-

14...♗6d7 15.♞he1+- winning, since black has no good moves – A. Akmetins.

14.♗xd5 ♙xd5 15.♞c3! with a double threat of ♞xg7 and ♗c7+.

15...axb5 16.♞xg7 ♙d7 (16...♞f8 17.♙xb5+ ♗d7 18.♞xd5! exd5 19.♞d1±) **17.♞xf7 ♙c6 18.♙g2! ♙xg2** (18...♞d7 19.♞xd5 exd5 20.♞d1+-) **19.♞xd8 ♙xd8 20.♞xe6+ ♙b7 21.♞d1** (It was better to play 21.♞e5!+-) **21... ♙c6 22.♞f7+ ♙c7 23.♙f4** An unnecessary trade of active pieces – A. Akmetins. (It was better to play 23.♞d6 ♗a6 24.♞h6+-)

23...♗a6 24.♙xc7 ♗xc7 25.h4 ♞hf8 26.♞xh7 ♞xf2 27.♞e7?! (It was better to play 27.♞e1) 27...♞e8 28.♞c5 and black lost on time. **1-0**

This game vividly demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of Alvis Vitolins – a great imagination, a sense of game dynamics – but a loss of concentration at the decisive stage of converting an advantage. This weakness, along with unconvincing endgame play and frequent time trouble, was highlighted by his coach Felikss Circenis, who added, “If Vitolins eliminates these

weaknesses, he will become a strong chess player.” (Sahs, No. 21, 1961.)

In 1962, Vitolins played in the USSR school students championship and was in the clear lead after six rounds, 1.5 points ahead of his closest competitor, Kazakh player Tsai.

No. 2

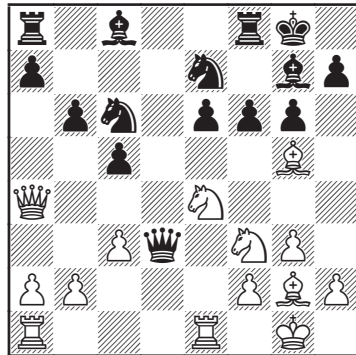
A.Vitolins – Tsai

King's Indian Attack

USSR School Students Championship
1962

1.e4 e6 2.d3 c5 3.♗f3 ♗c6 4.g3 g6 5.♙g2 ♙g7 6.0-0 ♗ge7 7.c3 0-0 8.♗bd2 d5 9.♞e1 dxe4 10.♗xe4 b6 11.♞a4!? Vitolins sacrifices a pawn to get a more active position.

11...♞xd3 12.♙g5 f6



13.♗xf6+ Vitolins sacrifices a piece and goes for complications. There are no concrete lines to prove white's advantage, but there's no clear counter to this intuitive sacrifice either. However, playing 13.♞ad1 first was more precise.

13...♙xf6 14.♙xf6 ♖xf6 15.♘g5 e5?!

Alternatives: A) 15...♙b7 16.♖ad1 ♗f5 17.f4 c4 18.♖d7 ♖b8 19.♗a3 with an equal but unclear position.

B) 15...♗f5 16.f4 b5!? 17.♗xb5 ♖b8 18.♗c4 ♗c2 19.b3 ♗b2 20.b4 also with an equal but unclear position.

16.♖xe5 (16.♗h4!?) 16...♙f5?

16...♙b7 17.♖xe7! (17.♖d1 b5!) 17...♘xe7 18.♙xb7 ♖af8 19.♙a6 ♗f5 20.f4 h6 with an unclear position.

17.♖xe7! ♘xe7 18.♙xa8 h6 19.♖d1 ♗e2 20.♙f3 ♗e5 21.♖d8+ ♖f8 22.♗c4+ ♙g7 23.♖xf8 hxg5 24.♗f7+ ♙h6 25.♖e8 ♗e1+ 26.♙g2 g4 27.♙xg4 ♙e4+ 28.♙f3 ♙xf3+ 29.♗xf3 1-0

During the tournament, another of Vitolins's shortcomings showed itself: he got excited too easily. A. Berzins wrote: "At the tournament finish the young Latvian chess player played too recklessly, lost several games and had to settle for second place, even though he scored 7 points, as many as the Leningrad player Alexander Shashin."

In 1963, the young Latvian talent won the USSR Youth Championship. Both his contemporaries and chess coaches predicted a bright future for him.

Vitolins's analytical abilities were also undeniable – even at the age of seventeen, when Vitolins was invited to join the Latvian SSR team after his USSR Youth Championship win, he had much to show to his more experienced teammates. In the annotations to game 14 you'll see one of those





analytical developments. Later, Aivars Gipslis used this idea without hesitation at the highest level – the USSR championship. It helped Gipslis to defeat the incumbent Soviet champion, Viktor Korchnoi.

Gipslis's win against Korchnoi wasn't the only time that Latvian players achieved success thanks to Alvis's analytical work. In this book, we'll see many examples of Vitolins's ideas being successfully used by Latvia's best players, including Mikhail Tal himself. A great example in Tal's games is the novelty found by Vitolins in the Rauzer Sicilian (see the annotations to the game Vitolins – Inkiöv).

Those who knew Vitolins personally won't hesitate to agree that only a select few could compete with him in talent and imagination. Unfortunately, Vitolins couldn't achieve sporting successes worthy of his talent because he couldn't become a versatile player. Alvis Vitolins's tournament results were wildly inconsistent – his games would fluctuate from a beautiful win against a grandmaster to an inexplicable loss to a first-category player. This imbalance can be largely explained by sudden mood swings characteristic of people with a sensitive psyche. Impatience often led to rash decisions in won positions – Alvis would get a huge positional advantage in his games, and we shall see that on the pages of this book. Sometimes, if the position became too boring, Vitolins would even get tired, resign suddenly and leave the tournament hall, despite still having enough resources to play on. Opponents who knew of this weakness exploited it, forcing Vitolins into boring, sluggish positions. Still, when Alvis got a position to his liking, he could defeat anyone.

One of Vitolins's main weapons was his unique sense of chess dynamics. As you read this book, you'll get to admire the countless creative and energetic attacks launched by Alvis. He would often go for questionable sacrifices just to get a dynamic position, where his well-coordinated pieces constantly created threats, forcing the opponent to solve difficult problems. You'll see an example of such “semi-correct” play by Vitolins in his game against

Aleksander Wojtkiewicz at the 1982 Latvian Championship (game 8 in this book).

His talent especially shone through in rapid games – Vitolins was a true wizard there. In blitz, he could unleash his creative imagination to the full, launching countless inspired attacks that even Mikhail Tal, the greatest rapid player of his time, couldn't withstand. Rapid and blitz demonstrated the best of Vitolins's talent. Vitolins was even known for his fondness for a line in the Cochrane Gambit that today is no longer playable.

Even though Alvis Vitolins never became a grandmaster, his genius showed through in his analytical work, where he demonstrated some fantastic ideas. Zigurds Lanka recalls that Vitolins could sit analyzing some opening line all night; he could go for 48 hours without sleep and could spend all his free time at the chess board.

Actually, Vitolins mostly didn't look for concrete improvements in lines, but rather came up with whole opening schemes and even concepts. Indeed, this book is divided into chapters to demonstrate Vitolins's contributions to various openings.



In the first chapter, *Wedge in the Center of the Board*, we present the ingenious Vitolins Gambit in the Alekhine Defense (6.d5!?). The fact that Alvis's opponents, Vladimir Bagirov and Edvins Kengis, declined the sacrifice shows the viability of this idea.

The second chapter illustrates some of Alvis's ideas in semi-open games – the Caro-Kann and French Defense, concentrating on the problem of castling.

Without a doubt, Vitolins's best analyses were in the Sicilian Defense, which Alvis played with both black and white, so this opening gets the most space in the book. The main leitmotif of Vitolins's Sicilian lines is aggressive development and bishop activity in the center. So in many Sicilian lines we see Alvis deploying his bishops to b5 and g5 and sacrificing central pawns to open files for direct attacks on his opponent's position.

The chapter *A New Instrument* shows different versions of Vitolins's favorite sacrifice on b5. Alvis was the first player to systematically analyze such sacrifices and use them in the Sicilian Defense. In the game against Nikolaj Katishonok (game 7), we see its effectiveness against the Sveshnikov Sicilian, but game 8 shows that such sacrifices can still bring over-the-board success when they're theoretically incorrect, because it's hard for opponents to find their way in complicated positions.

In the fourth chapter, we concentrate on the Rauzer Sicilian. Vitolins preferred an aggressive approach against it – a gambit where white sacrifices a central pawn to gain an open file and attack the opponent's king. Vitolins's attacking talent was in its element in such positions. Here, we see one of Alvis's best analytical findings – the gambit 11.♗b5! (game 10) that helped Mikhail Tal score two brilliant wins.

In the next chapter, *Raging Bishops*, you'll see Vitolins's recipes against the Dragon and Scheveningen – development of active bishops to b5 and g5 and aggressive play in the center.

In chapter 6, we see one of Vitolins's most ingenious discoveries: an intuitive piece sacrifice in the Poisoned Pawn Najdorf.

The chapter *Labyrinths of the Najdorf Sicilian* is the last one on the Sicilian Defense; we see duels fought between Latvian players in the depths of this line. The protagonist of this book defends the Argentinian Miguel Najdorf's system, while two of the book's authors deploy the white pieces.

In chapter 8, we look at the Ruy Lopez, which Vitolins handled superbly, bringing down many illustrious opponents. Against Seredenko, Vitolins again showed his amazing attacking prowess, and in the second part of the chapter we see him introducing a completely new concept in the Ruy Lopez and scoring a brilliant strategic win against the Soviet champion Iosif Dorfman. In the last part of the chapter, grandmaster Janis Klovans annotates

his breathtaking battle with Vitolins at the 1978 Jurmala international tournament.

In chapter 9, we concentrate on Vitolins's contribution to the theory of closed games. He came up with many original ideas and truly innovative strategic concepts. In the chapter Strategic Lessons, we learn about an incredibly original and deep invention of Vitolins – c7-c5 in the Bogo-Indian Defense. As we shall see, this strange-looking move hides a whole concept of “dark square strategy” behind it!

In chapter 10, we analyze a clever gambit in the Nimzo-Indian, which we call the Nimzowitsch-Vitolins Gambit. Vitolins tried the b7-b5 pawn sacrifice in various lines, getting complicated, dynamic games similar to the Benko Gambit.

We conclude with a duel between two great masters of attack: Alexei Shirov, a rising star at the time, and the mature Alvis Vitolins. Both masters stayed true to themselves, and we see real fire on board!

Wedge in the Center of the Board

One of Alvis Vitolins's most original innovations in opening theory is the unexpected move 6.d4-d5!? in one of the main lines of the Alekhine Defense. White offers a pawn sacrifice and drives a wedge into his opponent's position, dividing it in two.

The discussion in this line between Vitolins and one of the greatest Alekhine Defense specialists in Latvia (and in the world) lasted for several years. Both grandmaster Vladimir Bagirov and international master (now grandmaster) Edvins Kengis declined the sacrifice of the e5 pawn, demonstrating their respect for the multiple Latvian champion: his strength was most noticeable in positions full of initiative.

No. 3

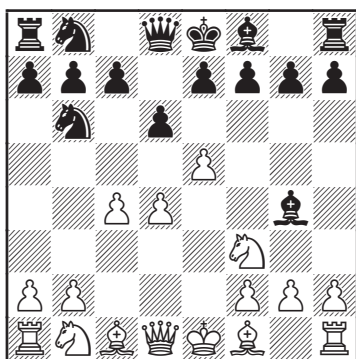
A. Vitolins – V. Bagirov

Alekhine Defense

Riga 1981

(Annotated by V. Bagirov and J. Vitomskis)

1.e4 ♞f6 2.e5 ♞d5 3.d4 d6
4.♞f3 ♚g4 5.c4 ♞b6



6.d5!?

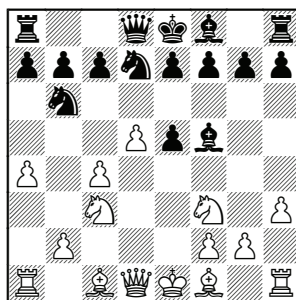
J.V.: A new, bold idea in one of the main lines of the Alekhine Defense.

6...♞8d7

J.V.: Let's also look at the line where the sacrifice is accepted: 6... dxe5 7.h3 ♚f5

After 7...♚xf3 8.♞xf3, white has enough compensation: the bishop pair and better development.

8.♞c3 ♞8d7 9.a4!



As soon as black gets the knights out, white launches a pawn attack on black's cavalry that needs to be stopped – 9...a5.

9...e6? 10.a5 ♞c8 11.g4 ♚g6 12.a6 bxa6 13.dxe6 fxe6 14.♞g5 – black's pawn structure is irreparably damaged!

Appendix I

Alvis Vitolins's Tournament Results

| | |
|------|---|
| 1960 | USSR Youth Team Championship (Latvian SSR team): 3 rd |
| 1961 | Latvian SSR Youth Championship: 1 st USSR Youth Spartakiad: 3 rd |
| 1962 | USSR Students' Championship: 2 nd |
| 1963 | Youth qualification tournament: 3 rd USSR Youth Championship: 1 st |
| 1964 | School students' zonal tournament: 1 st |
| 1966 | USSR Spartakiad, 1 st board: 2 nd USSR Youth Team Championship: 1 st USSR Armed Forces Championship: 1 st |
| 1968 | 9 th Latvian SSR Team Championship: 1 st Baltic Tournament: 1 st |
| 1972 | USSR Chess Olympiad (Latvian SSR team): 6 th |
| 1973 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st |
| 1975 | USSR Rapid Chess Championship: 6 th Baltic Republics tournament: 1 st |
| 1976 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st USSR Cup: 3 rd |
| 1977 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st Latvian SSR Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st USSR Farm Workers Team Championship: 3 rd |
| 1978 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st Latvian SSR Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st USSR Farm Workers Team Championship: 3 rd |
| 1979 | USSR Farm Workers Championship: 1 st |
| 1982 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st Latvian SSR Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st USSR Farm Workers Team Championship: 2 nd |
| 1983 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st 8 th USSR Spartakiad: 5 th |
| 1984 | Latvian SSR Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st Riga Cup '84: 1 st |
| 1985 | Latvian SSR Championship: 1 st |
| 1990 | Latvian SSR Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st |
| 1991 | Latvian Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st |
| 1992 | Latvian Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st |
| 1993 | Latvian Rapid Chess Championship: 1 st |
| 1994 | Liepajas Rokade festival: 4 th |
| 1995 | Liepajas Rokade festival: 4 th |