

The Lubyanka Gambit

Sergei Grodzensky

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Chess Composers

Lazar Zalkind – A Debt of Conscience

In the middle of 1931, in one of the issues of the magazine *64*, a demand was published that would pain the eye of today's reader: "The traitor Zalkind must be expelled from the ranks of Soviet problemists!" Two resolutions were published there as well: one, anonymous, "on behalf of all the composers of chess problems of the USSR", branded "the adventurous, corrupt activities of this renegade and traitor to the cause of the working class" an "embarrassment"; the other deserves to be cited in full.

"On behalf of the chess composers of the North Caucasus, strictly condemning the subversive and interventionist activities of the 'Union Bureau' of the Menshevik Central Committee, and welcoming the fairer verdict of the proletarian court, which has completely exposed the treacherous role of the Second International, we pledge to unite even more closely around the CPSU(b) and its Leninist Central Committee, steadily implementing the general line of the Party. The composition team of the region, emphasizing the treasonous participation in the work of the Mensheviks of one of the former leaders of Soviet composers L. B. Zalkind, makes a promise to carry out chess and checkers cultural work widely among the workers



and collective farmers in order for this work to become one of the elements of the cultural revolution, to saturate this work with political and class content. We undertake to establish international relations with proletarian groups of composers in the imperialist countries, providing these groups with assistance both in words and deeds. We commit ourselves to fighting for the purity of the class line in chess and to put an end to all and every attempt to cast a mask of apoliticism and classlessness on chess.

A. O. Gerbstman, N. V. Proskurnin, E. I. Umnov".

There we go! Note that the murder of Kirov and the beginning of

mass terror would occur more than two and a half years later. And yet people continued to imagine 1937 as the beginning of the approaching era of socialism.

Eventually, Lazar Zalkind got eight years in prison, which turned into the termination of his active creativity.

But who was he, Lazar Borisovich Zalkind, one of the biggest Russian chess composers for two decades but now forgotten by everyone?

The fate of many victims of Stalinist tyranny is such that even after posthumous rehabilitation, it is a very difficult task, if not a completely hopeless one, to establish their biography. And there are encyclopedias where instead of the date of death of the now famous luminary, a question-mark stands, and the biography occupies just a few lines. Hence all the more satisfied you feel every time you manage to find new material that allows you to finish drawing a portrait of one of the people featured in this book.

The author's publication earlier about L. B. Zalkind, which appeared in issue No. 11 of the magazine *64. Chess Review* for 1989, gained the attention of his granddaughter – Moscow engineer Tatiana Alexeevna Cherenkova. Tatiana Alexeevna had carefully preserved documents and letters of her grandfather, whom she never met. She heard a lot about him from her mother. From the facts reported by Tatiana, I managed

to identify the key milestones of Zalkind's life.

He was born on January 2 (14 New Style), in 1886 in Kharkov in the family of a tradesman. When Lazar was still a child, his family moved to Kostroma. Since childhood, the boy had been addicted to science. He graduated from Kostroma grammar school with a gold medal, which allowed him to overcome the notorious "percentage quota" established for persons of the Jewish faith when competing for a place at Moscow University.

In 1909, in order to marry N. V. Andreeva, he agreed to be baptized, since the bride's parents would not agree to their daughter's marriage to a Jew. However, activist of the Social Democratic Party Lazar Zalkind was indifferent to all religion. Back in 1903, he joined the RSDLP (the future Communist Party), and took the Bolshevik side. After the February Revolution of 1905, he took a Menshevik position on certain issues, and from April 1917, as the manager of the Moscow City Election Council, he led work on elections to the Constituent Assembly.

Upon graduation from the Faculty of Law (Economics Department) of Moscow University, he taught a course Economics and Trade Turnover at the university, employed as an associate professor. In the first years of Soviet power, his career as an economist progressed well. By the end of the 1920s, he was working as the head of the

accounting and statistical sector of the People's Commissariat of Trade.

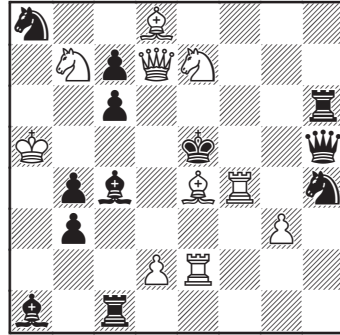
After the October Revolution, he withdrew from all party work, and engaged in public activities only in the field of chess. From 1926, he headed the Society of Chess Problems and Studies Fans of the All-Union Chess Section.

Lazar Zalkind discovered chess relatively late, at the age of fifteen, and did not strive for top sporting results. Rather, he immediately became interested in composing problems. His first composition appeared in 1903 in the chess column of literary appendices to *Niva*. Rapidly progressing in composition, Zalkind found himself at the forefront of Russian problemists. For many years, he edited the study columns in the magazines *Shakhmatny bulletin* ("Chess Bulletin") and *Shakhmaty*. He created more than 500 compositions. And even though he competed in composing tournaments infrequently, he won more than 60 commendations in international and Russian competitions.

In his work, Zalkind not only preserved the best traditions of Russian classical composition of the late 19th century, but also gave them an enlivening touch – a combinational element.

The following two-mover by Zalkind was one of the first successful attempts by a Russian problemist to implement the modernist ideas of the so-called "new school".

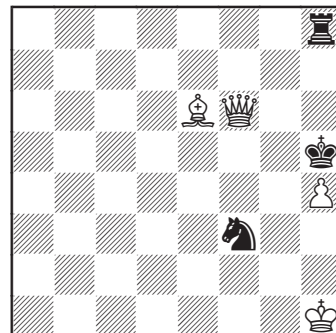
Composition No. 1
Western Daily Mercury
1913, 3rd prize



White to mate in 2 moves

An excellent first move **1. ♕e8!** with the threat of **2. ♖xc6#**, leaving the black king two empty squares. If he moves to them, black checks white: **1... ♔d4+ 2. ♙f5#**; **1... ♔e6+ 2. ♙d5#**. And here are two more beautiful symmetrical variations that were possible: **1... ♙e6 2. ♙f3#**; **1... ♗xe8 2. ♙d3#**. The four variations highlight the wholeness of the problem.

Composition No. 2
Deutsche Schachzeitung
1907



White to mate in 2 moves

Georgy Schneideman – The Surname That Cost His Life

You could be arrested for many “crimes” under Article 58. For a “political joke” (not just for telling one, but even for hearing one), or for an ambiguous joke, for a gesture that seemed suspicious to someone. And one famous chess player was sentenced on the basis of this article because of his surname! Moreover, for a surname that he had himself chosen in adulthood...

In the Russian-language book *People and Chess* by Vladimir Zak and Yakov Dlugolensky (Leningrad, 1988) which covers the chess history of St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad, G. G. Schneideman-Stepanov (1907-1941) is included in the list of Leningrad masters. However, in fact there was never any chess player with this double-barreled surname. Until the middle of 1937, we find the name of Leningrad citizen G. Stepanov in the tournament tables, and after that – the name of fellow Leningrad citizen G. Schneideman.

Everything can be explained easily. He first carried his mother’s surname, but at the age of 30 he suddenly changed it to his father’s last name, from whom, by the way, his mother was divorced since Georgy’s childhood.

When I think about his fate, I get a lump in my throat. I address



this question to the man who was murdered more than half a century ago: who told you to change your surname? You could have lived happily as a Stepanov. Some of your friends even outlived Perestroika! Yet, you decided to call yourself Schneideman. And it was 1937! Perhaps you trusted Stalin’s constitution? “I don’t know another country like this, where a person breathes so freely”. How accurate those lyrics are! Anyway, in the society of militant atheists,

those who had an Orthodox surname written in their passport breathed more freely. And you just changed it to a foreign one... Those who were smarter did the opposite...

According to Georgy Schneideman's friends, he was a completely different young man to the one with sad eyes that looks from the photo. They recall a red-cheeked fun fellow, a people person. He was friends with Tolush and many other Leningrad masters, including the study composer Vitaly Chekhov, too. When, in 1936, Chekhov was preparing for an important match with Kasparyan, it was Schneideman (still Stepanov) whom he chose as his second.

By that time, the reputation of Georgy Schneideman (we will call him by the name with which he passed away) was strong. We don't yet know anything about his childhood or his first chess steps. For the first time we meet his name in 1929 – in the table of the Sovtorgs-Luzhashchy championship. The young chess player, although ending up at the bottom of the top ten, achieved impressive victories over experienced players Alatorsev and Ravinsky. The following year, Georgy was included in the city's team for the match with Moscow. Here he played against E. Baum, from whom the Leningrader managed to take only half a point in two meetings.

Just a year later, Schneideman was considered one of the strongest chess players of Leningrad. In the

1931 city championship, he scored 8.5 points out of 17, sharing 6th-8th place. This was enough to get a place in the semifinal of the Soviet Championship. The first round of the semi-final brought a sensation – the Leningrad first-category player defeated a famous Moscow master with excellent play.

Game No. 37

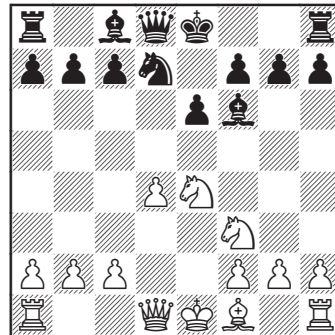
I. Kan – G. Schneideman

Leningrad Championship, 1931

French Defense C11

Commentary by S. Grodzensky

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 dxe4 5.♘xe4 ♙e7 6.♙xf6 ♙xf6 7.♘f3 ♘d7. In Spassky-Petrosian (23rd game of the 1966 World Championship match), 7...♙d7 was met by 8.♚d2 ♙c6 9.♘xf6+ ♚xf6 10.♘e5 0-0 11.0-0-0 ♘d7 12.♘xc6 bxc6 13.h4! with an advantage for white.



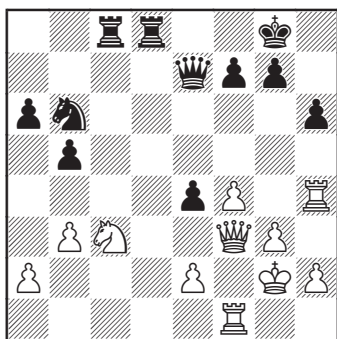
8.c3. If white's plans included long castling, then he should not have made this weakening move.

23.♖xd5 ♖b7 24.♖d4 ♖xe4+ 25.♖xe4 ♖c2, which is the best practical chance to save the game, since it would have been very difficult for black to convert his positional advantage in the rook endgame.

22...e5! (white cannot now continue 23.♖d6 in view of 23...♖xc3) 23.♖h4 h6 24.f4. A desperate attempt, but white's situation already looks very bad, as black threatens ♖fd8, and the h4 rook gets locked out of the game.

24...♖fd8 25.♖f3. After 25.♖e3, it was even possible to play 25...b4, for example, 26.♖xb6 bxc3, and the c-pawn should decide the outcome of the fight; or 26.♘e4 ♘d5 27.♖f3 f5 and so on.

25...e4! The strongest choice, since it cuts off the awkward h4 rook for a long time.



26.♘xe4 (or 26.♖xe4 ♖xe4+ 27.♘xe4 f5, and then the black rooks invades the second rank) 26...f5 27.♘f2 ♖d2 28.♖h3 ♖xe2 29.♖b7 ♖e4+ 30.♖xe4 fxe4 31.g4. Finally! But there are still no squares for the h3 rook.

31...♘d5 32.♖g1 (if 32.♖g3, then 32...♖c3+ with an easy win) 32...♘xf4 33.♖e3 ♖cc2. White resigned. There's no defense against 34...♘d3, and if 34.♖xe4, then 34...♘h3+ spectacularly solves the problem.

In the Leningrad championship of 1939, candidate master Schneideman scored 8 points out of 15, and as a result shared 8th-9th place with the future grandmaster Tolush, whom he defeated in their head-to-head meeting.

Game No. 44

A. Tolush – G. Schneideman

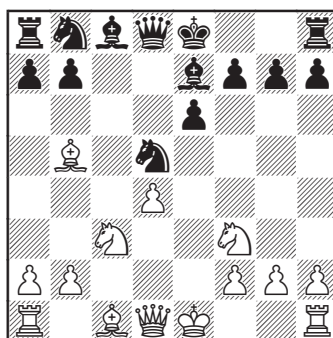
Leningrad Championship, 1939

Caro-Kann Defense B14

Commentary by G. Schneideman

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♙e7 7.cxd5 ♘xd5. (The position on the board is characteristic of one of the variations of the Queen's Gambit – S.G.). The move 7...exd5 would have been also met by 8.♙b5+.

8.♙b5+



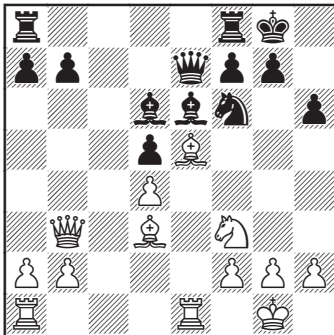
8...♘d7. In the game Alekhine – Elisaskes (Tournament of Nations, 1939) black responded 8...♙d7, and got a difficult game after 9.♙xd7+ ♘xd7 10.♘xd5 exd5 11.♖b3 ♘b6 despite the simplifications – white has strong pressure along the open e- and c-files, and against the b7 and d5 pawns.

In this game, black tries to reinforce his defense with the sacrifice of a pawn, but white, wisely refusing the “Greek gift”, still gets an advantage. Alekhine’s novelty 7.cxd5 is still waiting for a refutation (the move 7.cxd5 is still considered one of the strongest in the Panov Attack – S.G.).

9.♘xd5 exd5 10.♖b3 0-0 11.0-0. 11.♖xd5 ♙b4+ is weak, as black gets a dangerous attack aimed at the white king stuck in the center.

11...♘f6 12.♖e1 h6. Black needs to prepare the development of his bishop to e6 and prevent the unpleasant ♙g5.

13.♙f4 ♙d6 14.♙e5 ♙e6 15.♙d3 ♖e7

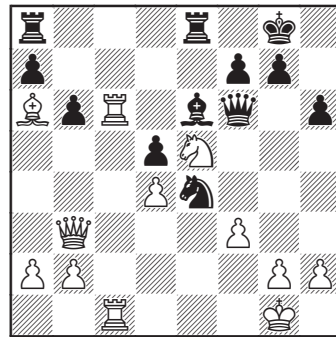


16.♖ac1. This move is stronger than 16.♙xf6 ♖xf6 17.♖xb7 ♖ab8 with a good game for black.

16...b6. Now white firmly captures the c-file.

17.♙a6 ♞e4 18.♖c6 ♙xe5 19.♘xe5 ♖fe8 20.♖ec1 ♖f6 21.f3?

Sofar, white has played excellently, and after 21.♖e3 he would have got a significant advantage. The move in the text is weak and meets an unexpected tactical refutation.



21...♞c5 22.dxc5. Forced. The continuation 22.♖a3 ♖f4 was bad (22...♖g5! – S.G.) 23.♖d1 ♘xa6 24.♖xa6 f6 (24...f6? 25.♖b7!= – S.G.).

22...♖xe5 23.cxb6 axb6 24.♖xb6 d4 25.♖d3 ♙f5. The strongest move. Now the passed d-pawn cannot be stopped.

26.♖d2 d3 27.♖d1 ♖c5+ 28.♖f2 ♖a5 29.♖b5. If 29.♙c4, then 29...♖e2 solves the problem, while in the case of 29.b4 the move 29...♖a4 wins.

29...♖xa6 30.♖xf5 ♖e2 31.♖d4 ♖e6 32.♖xd3 ♖b6+ 33.♖d4.

Or 33.♔h1 ♕f2 34.♖g1 ♗e1 with inevitable checkmate.

33...♖d8. White resigned.

Schneideman claimed victory in a sharp fight against the tournament winner Lisitsyn.

Game No. 45

G. Lisitsyn – G. Schneideman

Leningrad Championship, 1939

Reti Opening A05

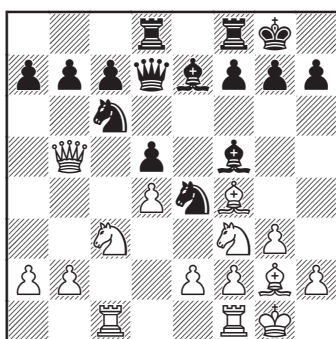
Commentary by G. Schneideman

1.♞f3 ♞f6 2.g3 ♞c6. An original and, apparently, decent continuation.

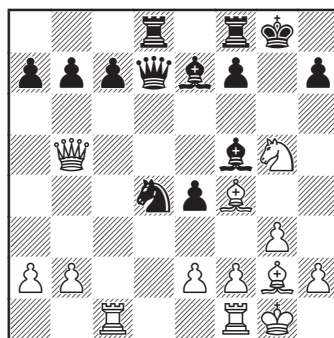
3.d4 d5 4.♞g2 ♞f5 5.c4 e6 6.♕a4. Now the queen stands poorly. It was better to play 6.0-0.

6...♕d7 7.0-0 ♞e7 8.♞c3 0-0 9.♞f4 ♞e4 10.♖ac1 ♖ad8. Defending the queen and threatening to take the d4 pawn after the exchange of knights on c3.

11.cxd5 exd5 12.♕b5? Failing to notice black's main threat. It was necessary to play 12.♖fd1, defending the d4 pawn.



12...g5! 13.♞xe4 (13.♞e3 would have been met by 13...g4 14.♞d2 ♞xc3 15.♖xc3 ♞xd4 16.♕xd7 ♞xe2+) 13...dxe4 14.♞xg5 ♞xd4



15.♕xb7. The move 15.♕c4 b5 looks no better. After 15.♕xd7 ♞xe2+ 16.♔h1 ♖xd7 17.♖ce1 ♞xf4 18.gxf4 ♞xg5 19.fxg5 ♖e8 black still has a winning position. Sacrificing the exchange, white is still trying to complicate the game, but unexpectedly meets a quick end.

15...♞xe2+ 16.♔h1 ♞xc1 17.♖xc1 ♞xg5! 18.♞xg5 ♕d1+ 19.♞f1 (not 19.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 20.♞f1 ♞h3 and game over) 19...♕f3+ 20.♔g1 ♖d1 21.♕b5. The “last” trap. If black thoughtlessly plays 21...♞h3, threatening to checkmate on g2, then it will be followed by 22.♖xd1 ♕xd1 23.♞h6 ♕xf1+ 24.♕xf1 ♞xf1 25.♞xf8 with a drawn ending.

21...e3 (immediately decides the outcome) 22.♞xe3 ♞e4 23.♕g5+ ♔h8 24.♕e5+ f6 25.♕xe4 ♖xf1+. White resigned.

The Gulag Prisoners – “Vorkuta, Vorkuta, a Wonderful Planet...”

The plane to Vorkuta took off from Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport on a warm May morning – I set off on a work trip to a city completely unfamiliar to me, but whose name has haunted me my entire life: Vorkuta is indicated in my passport as my place of birth. It so happened that soon after my birth, in the place of my father’s exile, I was taken by my mother to her homeland – to Ryazan.

I must admit that I often find it difficult to choose a title for an article. But there I was, leaving for my work trip, and various options for the future title came to mind: “To Vorkuta On My Own”, “Chess in the Arctic”, “Checkmate on the 67th Parallel”. I could see green meadows through the porthole, but I could not get rid of the familiar motif of a simple and always for some reason fun-sounding song: “Vorkuta, Vorkuta, a wonderful planet! Twelve months of winter, and the rest is summer”.

However, the words of the song got a real meaning when endless white fields began to float under the wing of the plane, which appeared so unexpectedly that I did not immediately realize that it was not a cloud, but a snowy plain. After landing, I got to appreciate that the weather in Vorkuta on Victory Day,

May 9, is somewhat cooler than in Moscow on International Women’s Day, on March 8. It is perfectly possible to take a cross-country skiing trip around the city.

The history of Vorkuta starts in the early 1930s. There was bare, deserted tundra here, when in June 1930 a group of six people led by 24-year-old Moscow geologist Georgy Chernovoi discovered deposits of coking coal in the middle reaches of the wild, unexplored Vorkuta River.

Now at this place, near the first ever mine in the Arctic, there is a granite complex entangled with barbed wire – Vorkutlag, alas, outweighed the names of courageous explorers in the public’s memory.

For many years, there was an opinion that Vorkuta was tamed and then built up by young people who arrived in this harsh region on trips organized by Komsomol or thanks to the dictates of their hearts. Democratization and publicity have, however, made significant adjustments to this judgment that was so convenient during those years, and now it is known for certain that the main productive force during the creation of this polar boiler room consisted of thousands of prisoners, and, you know, most of them were innocent.

On the streets of Vorkuta, there were often stands with the city’s emblem – a deer standing near a pithead that was topped with a five-pointed star. But perhaps the most respected society in the city was the local Memorial branch, which chose three rows of barbed wire and a small circle of the sun on a black background as its emblem, as on the picture.

In the early 1960s, during the Khrushchev “thaw”, the Vorkuta Museum of Local Lore asked my father to share his memories. The reply from Yakov Davidovich Grodzensky dated March 20, 1965 is kept in the museum archive:

“...The city of Vorkuta is young even from the point of view of just one human life, let alone on a historical scale – it is not even forty. The city is young, but its history is unique, full of tragic events and bitter fates generated by the years of the Stalinist cult, which has left a sad memory. I lived in Vorkuta from 1935 to 1950. I served a three-year prison sentence, then, without trial or investigation, without a case or a crime, it was prolonged – another 5 years and, having worked as a convict for more than 8 years, instead of three, I was released for good work on April 17, 1943 – on the first day of arrival of the new head of the Vorkutstroi, M. M. Maltsev.

“Free people of our type were considered ‘directive workers’, i.e.,



they were assigned to construction in accordance with a directive from above. We considered ourselves lucky not to be serving in the prison surrounded by barbed wire, but on the other side, even with some restrictions, without the right to leave and without many other actual rights. But even such ‘freedom’ seemed to some people too much for the ‘enemies of the people’ who diligently mined coal and built the city: on December 13, 1949, I, among many others, was arrested. And only in the summer of 1950 after interrogation and ordeals in prison, were we gradually moved out of Vorkuta, a city created mainly by the work of people indicted under Article 58.

“I hope you will not see in my words an immodest desire to speak about myself: my fate is the fate of thousands of others, just like me, many of whom ‘gave their soul to God’ and were forgotten. With their sufferings, sweat, and blood, they

inhabited the dead tundra, erecting a polar boiler room. It was them, and not those who stood on their bones, those who were awarded Stalin’s laureateships, orders, medals, monetary awards and all sorts of bonuses for long service. Vorkuta is rich in minerals. But its history is immeasurably richer, the history of those who, deprived of human rights, heroically strengthened the force and power of their country during the Great Patriotic War and long before it. That’s why the history section should be the most important in the local museum...”

And how did the history of chess in Vorkuta begin? Afanasy Mikhailovich Sfinaris, a veteran of the Vorkutlag, told the author that chess battles were often arranged in the dormitories. The games were

sometimes played over-emotionally. They also led to physical altercations. In any case, trash talking your opponent, rejoicing at his bad moves, was fraught with the danger of an acute conflict arising.

Chess was the only entertainment in the camp, and that’s why all the prisoners became amateur players, learning the basics of the game on the job.

Candidate Master Leonard Melkonyan, a multiple champion of Vorkuta and the Komi Republic, recalled that, when he arrived in the polar city in the early 1960s, fascinated by the romance of the North, he found many people who had gone through Vorkutlag. One of them, Sergey Vladimirovich Sukhorsky, gave him a present, a homemade chess set that had been used to play in prison.



Vorkutlag prisoners played using these chess pieces

Although many prisoners at Vorkutlag played chess, there were no official tournaments in the pre-war years. Prisoners were periodically reallocated to different dormitories, so the chess players were unable to form close groups.

Among the prisoners, Dmitry Lozhenitsyn had a reputation as a strong chess player. Dmitry Borisovich had a good memory and was famous for his ability to play well blindfold. In fact, Lozhenitsyn had suffered because of chess. When a student in the early 1920s, he became friends with the son of the Belgian consul on the basis of a common interest in chess. When it was time for the consul to return to his homeland, Lozhenitsyn decided to maintain relations with his friend by playing correspondence chess. Many years passed after the completion of these correspondence duels, but it was 1937, and Lozhenitsyn, who had become a surgeon by that time, was convicted on the basis of this correspondence from his school years “for his links with the global bourgeoisie”.

The camp was divided in 1947, and the convicts under Article 58 were allocated to a special camp – Rechlag. There were no chess competitions for the camp as a whole, but there were tournaments held in each separate camp point (SCP). The strongest players there were N. Korovin, V. Pankratov, G. Arakelyan (Arakelov), A. Kriger,

V. Kushnir, A. Savenko, and A. Samutin.

Right after Stalin’s death, the regime in Rechlag was eased, and the prisoners were allowed to hold team competitions between the camp departments. In September 1953, the operative officer N. Lyutov (who was distinguished by a humane attitude to prisoners according to the memoirs of veterans of the Rechlag), even allowed a fragment of the SCP championship for mine No. 40 to be captured on film.

Only one print was made, and even that one came out blurry. And yet we reproduce this technically weak photo, because it is the only visible recording of the prisoners playing in the Rechlag.

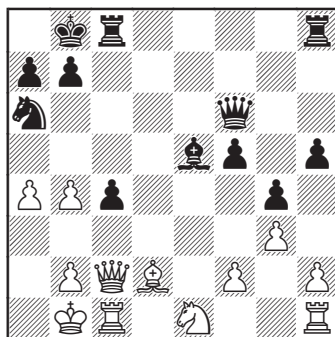
The decisive game in the SCP championship in September 1953 was V. Kushnir – A. Kriger, in which the following position appeared after white’s 23rd move:

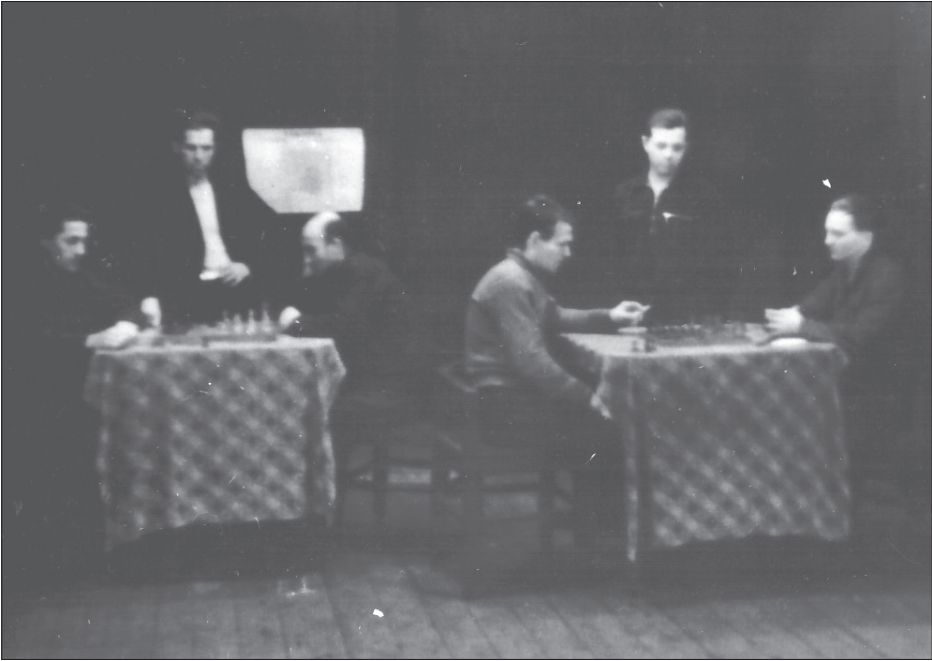
Game No. 67

V. Kushnir – A. Kriger

Vorkuta, SCP for mine No. 40, 1953

Commentary by S. Grodzensky





Black continued **23...♙d6**
24.♖c3. White offers to exchange queens in the hope of strengthening his b4 pawn. Black probably should have done this, preserving somewhat better chances in the endgame. Instead, he made a superficial move **24...♙e5?** and after white's response **25.♙f4!**, which he had failed to anticipate, he found himself in a difficult situation.

There followed **25...♖he8**
26.♘f3 gxf3 27.♖he1 ♔a8 28.♖xe5 and black resigned.

Black should have drawn from here, but it seems that he suffered a psychological shock due to the sharp deterioration of his position, which only five moves earlier had looked quite attractive.

Having won this meeting, Vladimir Kushnir became champion of his SCP. It actually took him a long time to reach this semi-official title. He took up chess seriously when, in 1947, after graduating from school, he got a place at the History Department of Leningrad University. There he met the master L. Zhukhovitsky and the future masters E. Stolyar and V. Byvshev. But as soon as he started his studies, Kushnir was arrested following a denunciation by a provocateur on January 1, 1948, and half a year later he was convicted on several counts under Article 58 and sentenced to 25 years of correctional labor camps as well as five years of deprivation of rights.