

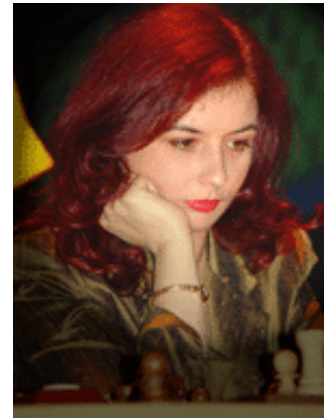


SKITTLES
ROOM

In the Limelight: Alisa Maric

by Harald Fietz

The grandmasters did not find the answer. “Say, how old is Alisa actually?” “I don’t know, but she is not very old.” “Sure, but very experienced.” “Yes, very experienced.” On that afternoon, spectators at the Dortmund chess meeting 2002 did not get to know her date of birth as commentating chess experts Helmut Pfleger and Klaus Bischoff sent unanswered questions through the darkness in the golden ballroom of the Congress Center. Before the round began, the organisers mechanically recited a few of her successes in women's chess, but then they revealed their special focus: in common with many chess players, this chess artiste with her brown, red-toned hair and a lot of gold jewellery had been reduced to the most common characteristic in chess – her world rating number. Behind the name of Alisa Maric we find 2450. This figure served as proof that an unequal struggle was about to take place, because a difference of 100 points is a big gap. Everybody likes to think of David and Goliath. In this case the David was a young boy, born 13 years ago with the surname of Baramidze, who currently plays for the local chess club, Schachfreunde Dortmund-Brackel. In the second quarter of 2002 he achieved his third IM norm and raised his rating to 2351. He was due to undergo a chess trial with the slogan “Young Man versus Beauty”. The standard of his play and the age of this Georgian-born youth, who has lived in Germany since 1998, are well-known to most chess fans, but hardly anything was previously known about the strongest Yugoslavian woman player, who participated in the Dortmund B-tournament as long ago as 1999. However, her name has been a guarantee of world wide headlines for more than 20 years.



In 1982 this brown-eyed girl won the women's championship in the chess metropolis of Belgrade. At the time she was twelve years old: she and her twin sister Miriana were born in New York on 10 January 1970. According to US law the children therefore had an American passport and dual nationality ensuring freedom to travel, something which was important during the tense political situation of the 1990s. A year after her birth her parents moved back to their native Yugoslavia. Her father, who had worked for the United Nations, returned to his professorship in mathematics, her mother taught mathematics at a high school and Alisa's twin sister also oriented herself towards numbers and formulas. At this time in the socialist sport system, great numbers of chess instructors were available for coaching, and the journey from the family home in Belgrade city

centre to the chess club was not too far. Success came rapidly in the 1980s: in 1986 Alisa won the national women's championship and then became head of the Yugoslav Olympiad team for Dubai in the same year. Except for 1992, she remained in this position for another seven "meetings of the nations", and in 1988 the team won the bronze medal. Due to the sports boycott against Yugoslavia, the team took part in only two European team Championships - in 1999 and 2001 - and in the first appearances, in Batumi, Georgia, they won the silver medal.

However, these are not the only milestones in a career that was rewarded with the women's grandmaster title in 1988 and the men's IM title in 1991. Four times she competed in the women's candidate tournament for the world championship as well as in both knockout tournaments. At the beginning of the 1990s, Alisa Maric and the Chinese woman player Xie Jun were the only ones to counter the superior strength of Soviet women players. In 1991 their candidate final was held in Belgrade and Peking, and it was the first time that a challenger was selected who did not come from the strongest chess nation. At that time communication between these opponents of the same age was minimal, as the Chinese player did not speak English and reacted coolly to interviews from daily papers that had been translated by the supporting embassy staff. The local hero was allegedly outlining her plans for the autumn when the world championship match with Maya Chiburdanize was scheduled. A decade later, Xie Jun is now fluent in English and relations are friendly. In October 2000, the Chinese woman was the only foreign woman player at the Belgrade GM tournament and was alarmed by the massive demonstrations which finally brought about Milosovic's resignation and the end of the regime on October 5th. This time her former rival showed Xie Jun her home city and also invited her to her home.

The end of the one-party system and continuing economic depression also pose many questions for professional chess players. Chess authorities have offered little support and many sponsors have left the scene. Progress in chess has to be organised by the players themselves. The Ukrainian grandmasters Alexander Mikhalchishin and Andrei Zontakh acted as occasional trainer for the popular player who in 1999 - together with her

team mate Natasha Bojkovic - was awarded the National Sports Grammy in the category of best women's team. However, even in chess-loving Yugoslavia, the royal game is not a reliable basis on which to build one's future, especially if you prefer to stay in your home country without having to travel all the time. The last period of absence was in 1999, when NATO planes bombarded Belgrade. Coincidentally, Alisa was playing in a tournament in Switzerland, and was able to stay at her aunt's home in the city of Basle. Back in the Balkan metropolis, she 'surprised' her resident coach GM Bosko Abramovic with a question about

what would be different for her in the new century. She offered him a reward of 100 German marks if he could find the right answer. At the end of 1999 this might have been regarded as a fairly generous prize as hard currency meant it was a special bonus. However, he did not manage to find the answer. The solution had nothing to do with chess. Alisa decided to take advantage of her recent degree in economics and to start a job in the internal systems management department of a state-owned gasoline company, in order to gain professional experience in the world of business. On one hand a regular job, which also offers the chance to play in important international tournaments, is a good argument - but on the other hand, holding down an 8-to-4-job does not entice anyone to attend chess training on a regular basis. Aerobics in the gym and theatre visits are more pleasurable activities in which to relax from a hard day's work.



RAD Belgrade's top board at the European Women Club Team Championship in Antalya

However, nobody who used to enjoy travelling, meeting friends and seeing nice places as the favourable aspects of the international chess scene is prepared to give it up easily. Not only for the Dortmund event, Alisa remained true to her new motto: "I'm glad to be invited. I like to be in the limelight." With a pretty face perhaps it is easier to become an ambassador of one of the world's leading chess countries. But you have to fulfill expectations and success is a good argument: at the end of the year 2000 Alisa Maric scored 8½ out of 13 game at the top board at the Olympiad in Istanbul and managed to reach the final four of the FIDE women's chess world championship. Staying in foreign countries can be very different: in India the embassy provided everything, from accompanying staff to a car at her disposal, and sight seeing trips, but during the FIDE world cup in the remote sport complex in Shenyang she had personally to 'fight' with the organisers to change her damp hotel room. Like other sports stars, she prefers good playing conditions.



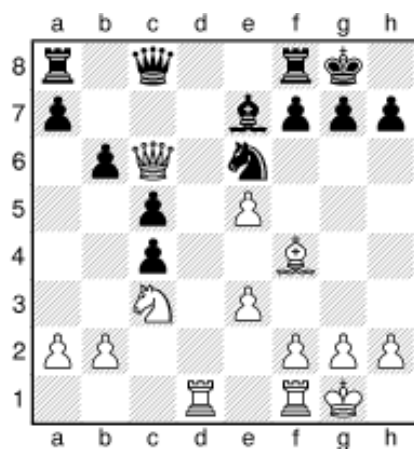
Maric-Baramidze, Game 2: Black makes his 5th move.

Before the Dortmund match she was in a fighting mood: "I have to show my best chess to have a good chance." Contrary to her sister, who prefers to play 1.e4, Alisa, who is the elder by 21 minutes, likes to play closed openings. Staying power – even for six or seven hours – is one of her trademarks. With her trim figure, she sits like a sphinx at the board and endlessly calculates variations. She hates the new FIDE time control rule which caught her out during the European Women's Championship in Varna, Bulgaria. In a tie-break she failed to qualify for the next world championship. Luckily she will get another chance in 2003.

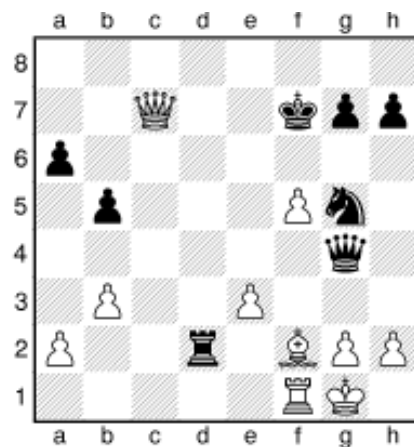
In Dortmund the clock also proved to be a decisive factor in the process of putting up a tough defence or showing good technique to convert material advantage. Without regular play every game is a challenge, although she regards the Caro-Kann defence as her favourite weapon after Ljubomir Ljubojevic advised her to use it as a secret weapon in the candidate final in 1991. After a first round defeat with 1...c6 she immediately managed to level the match.

Maric, A. - Baramidze, D. [D37] Dortmund (Game 2) 2002

1.Nf3 d5 2.d4 e6 3.c4 Nf6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Bf4 0–0 6.e3 b6 7.cxd5 exd5 8.Bd3 Bb7 9.0–0 Nbd7 10.Ne5 c5 11.Qf3 Nxe5 12.dxe5! Ne8 13.Rad1 Nc7 14.Bc4! dxc4 15.Qxb7 Qc8 16.Qc6 Ne6



Bxc3 25.Rxd8+ Rxd8 26.Qxc3 Qe4 27.f5 Rd3 28.Qc1 Ng5 Lutz considers 28...Nf8!? 29.Qxc5 Rd2 30.Bf2 Rxa2 with counter-play. **29.Qxc5 Rd2 30.Bf2 Qg4 31.Qc8+ Kf7 32.Qc7+**



17.Qb5 Blitz specialist Bischoff acted as live commentator and proposed a well-known knight manoeuvre: 17.Nd5, but White dismissed this move because of 17...Qe8. **17...a6 18.Qxc4 b5 19.Qe2?!** From behind the microphone Bischoff and Lutz suggested 19.Qe4, but White prefers to act with the queen from the second rank. However, this move has the disadvantage of losing control of the e4-square. **19...Qb7 20.Bg3 Rfd8 21.b3!** Important because Black cannot activate his pawn majority. **21...Rac8 22.f4 f5 23.exf6 Bxf6 24.Qc2**

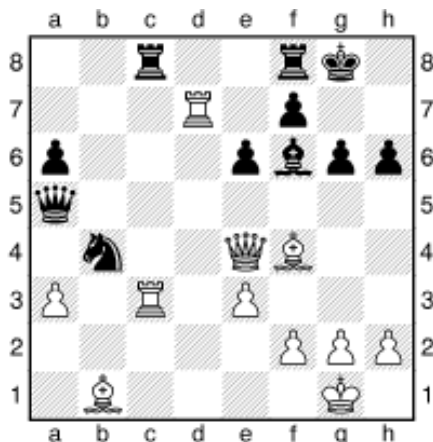
32...Kf6? After 32...Kg8 the outcome is open. Now the game comes to a swift finish as the last tactic fails. **33.Bg3 Rxc2+ 34.Kh1!** A glance is enough to spot the trick: 34.Kxc2? Qe4+ 35.Kf2 (35.Kg1?? Nh3#) 35...Qf3+ 36.Ke1 Qxe3+ 37.Kd1 Qd3+ 38.Ke1 Qe3+ with perpetual check. **34...Rxc2+ 35.Kxc2!** Be aware of 35.Bxc2? Qe4+ 36.Kg1 Nh3# **1–0**

But in the decisive phases of the match she let to many favourable positions slip. In game four she could have blown away her

opponent with a tactical stroke but she missed it.

Maric, A. - Baramidze, D. [D37] Dortmund (Game 4) 2002

1.Nf3 d5 2.d4 e6 3.c4 Nf6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Bf4 0-0 6.e3 c5 7.dxc5 Bxc5 8.a3 Nc6
9.Be2 dxc4 10.Bxc4 a6 11.Qc2 Bd7 12.0-0 Rc8 13.Rfd1 h6 14.Rac1 Be7
15.Ba2 Qa5 16.Nd2 b5 17.Nde4 Nxe4 18.Qxe4 b4 19.Rxd7 bxc3 20.Bb1 g6
21.Rxc3 Bf6 22.b4 Nxb4!?

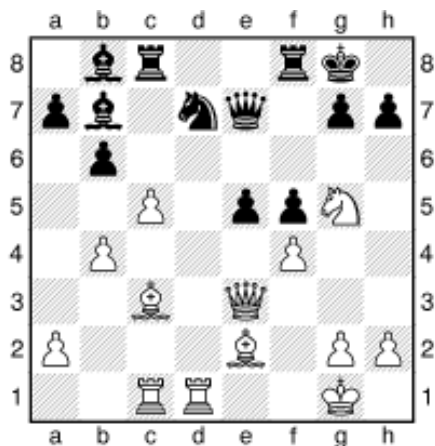


23.Rxc8? Maric misses 23.Rxf7! Kxf7
24.Bd6 with the idea 25.Qxg6 mate. White gets decisive advantage with 24...Qh5
25.g4 Qg5 26.h4! 23...Rxc8 24.h4 Nd5
25.Kh2 Qb5 26.Rxf7 Kxf7 27.Qxg6+ Ke7
28.Bxh6 Rh8 29.Bg5 Qb8+ 30.g3 Qg8
31.Bxf6+ Nxf6 32.Qc2 Qc8 33.Qb2 Qb8
34.Qc1 Rxh4+ 35.Kg1 Rh5 36.Bg6 Rh6
37.Qc5+ Qd6 38.Qa7+ Nd7 And young David Baramidze took a 2½-1½ lead in the match. 0-1

In the next game she reached a promising endgame with queen versus rook and bishop, but due to mutual time trouble she had to agree to a draw after 126 moves. As a result, the reasons for the 3½-4½ match loss are very simple although she won the final game.

Maric, A. - Baramidze, D. [D37] Dortmund (Game 8) 2002

1.Nf3 d5 2.d4 e6 3.c4 Nf6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Qc2 c6 6.e4 dxe4 7.Nxe4 Nxe4 8.Qxe4
Nd7 9.Bd2 c5 10.dxc5 A new approach! 10...Nxc5 11.Qe3 0-0 12.Be2 b6 13.b4
Nd7 14.0-0 Bf6 15.Rac1 Bb7 16.Rfd1 Qe7 17.Ng5 Rac8 18.Ne4 Be5 19.f4 Bb8
20.Bc3 f5 21.Ng5 e5 22.c5!



22...bxc5 23.Bc4+ Kh8 24.Nxh7 Kxh7
25.Qh3+ Kg6 26.g4 Rh8 27.gxf5+ Kf6
28.Qg4 1-0

At the end of August she had again to ask her employers for some extra time off as the national team championships for both men and women took place. Alisa used to play for Agrouniversal Zemun, the top club in the Belgrade area. With support from another top women player, Russia's Alisa Galliamova, they won three European Club Championships (1996 in Smederevska Palanka, 2000 in Halle and 2001 in Belgrade). Now she has moved to the newly emerging top team RAD Belgrad, which is managed by ambitious staff and receives financial support from a building company.



Three of the successful players from RAD Belgrade, the Yugoslavian women team champion 2002 (left to right) Mariana Maric, Sanja Kalevic and Alisa Maric. Photo courtesy Politka Belgrade

At the end of August she again had to ask her employers for some extra time off as the national team championships for both men and women took place in the sea side resort of Budva in Montenegro. Alisa used to play for Agrouniversal Zemun, the top club in the Belgrade area. With support from another top woman player, Russia's Alisa Galliamova, they won three European Club Championships (1996 in Smederevska Palanka, 2000 in Halle and 2001 in Belgrade). Now she has moved to the newly emerging top team RAD Belgrad, which is managed by an ambitious staff and receives financial support from a construction company.

A "dream team" was supposed to win the national title and then travel to Antalya in Turkey to win the European crown. Two of the current stars in women's chess signed contracts: "vice" world champion Alexandra Kosteniuk and reigning European champion Antoneta Stefanova. However, the Russian girl dropped out at the very last moment. Nevertheless, they won the team championship ahead of Agrouniversal (with Georgian Nino Khurtsidze at the top board) and BAS Belgard (with Natasha Bojkovic at the top board). The winner's line up was Alisa Maric (6½ out of 10), Bulgarian Antoneta Stefanova (3/3), Israeli Yelena Dembo (3½/4), Ukrainian-born but now based in Germany Nathalia Kiseleva (1½/2), Sanja Kalevic (6/9), Mirjana Maric (8½/10) and Milena Vasic (1½/2).



BAS Belgrade, from left to right, Inna Gaponenko, Tatjana Vasilevich, team captain Milunka Lazarevic, Natasha Bojkovic and Maria Manakova.

This team represented Yugoslavia at the European team championship in

Anatalya from September 28th to October 6th. This event was played with four players per team and eleven clubs participated. But the favourite did not live up to expectations and finished in fifth place. During the seven rounds it lost two matches, drew two matches and won only three matches. RAD Belgrade mainly suffered from Antoneta Stefanova's strange performance on board two. The European Champions started with three wins, drew in round four and then lost three games in a row. Alisa Maric remained unbeaten at the top board and scored 4½ out of 7. The same result was achieved by Yelena Dembo on board three. Nathalia Kiseleva took 4 points from 6 games and Sanja Kalevic lost her only game. Due to a 4-0 win against the weaker Turkish team from Istanbul University Belgrade's local rival BAS won the European championship on tie-break with 11-3 team points and 17½ board points ahead of Russia's Ladia Kazan which beat RAD Belgrade 2½-1½ in the final round to reach exactly the same result.

After this disappointing tournament the next important event in Alisa Maric's calendar will be the Olympiad in Slovenian Bled which starts at the end of October 2002. German chess fans can also hope to see her again, because the 32-year old will play for TK Turm Emstetten, last season's runner-up in the women's Bundesliga championship. Maybe the organisers of this team event will not be too gallant and will announce her age before the match. Then chess fans can give their undivided attention to unsolved questions on the board.

Pictures from Dortmund by Harald Fietz, from Budva by "Politika" and from Antalya by Thilo Gubler.



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