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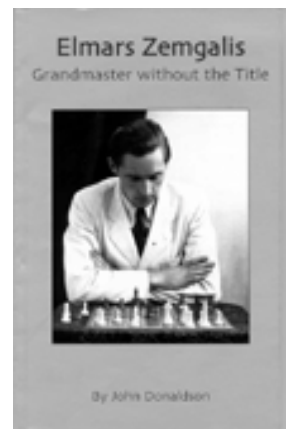
Displaced Person... Universal Talent

John S. Hilbert

Elmars Zemgalis: Grandmaster Without the Title, by John Donaldson, 2001 Pomeranian Publishing, Softcover, English Algebraic Notation, 160 pp., \$16.00

I should admit I have a liking for the little known. For bringing a little light to what otherwise may in misfortune be left in darkness. For recalling the forgotten. For rooting for the underdog. Thus I am predisposed to liking John Donaldson's most recent contribution to the art of chess biography. His book, *Elmars Zemgalis: Grandmaster Without the Title*, introduces a little known figure, comparatively speaking, to a broader audience of readers, and does so in a succinct, interesting and inexpensive manner.

Donaldson, himself an International Master, has distinguished himself as well in the field of chess history and biography. His impressive, two volume work on the great Akiba Rubinstein, written in conjunction with fellow IM Nikolay Minev, is his most detailed and painstaking effort in this field. His *A Legend on the Road*, the story of Bobby Fischer's 1964 simultaneous tour, is in all likelihood the most detailed recounting of a grandmaster's single season series of exhibitions ever attempted, and an intriguing display of the chess historian's craft. In *Elmars Zemgalis*, Donaldson shifts his focus from marquee figures such as Fischer and Rubinstein to a lesser known player, one who had been brought to his attention by Viktors Pupols, another strong pillar of Northwestern United States chess. But lesser known, in this context, hardly means less entertaining. There is a fine talent in the games of Elmars Zemgalis, a talent the curious reader will find entertaining and rewarding.





Before I turn to particulars, here is a brief overview of what you will find. The book is a paperback, measuring approximately five inches by eight inches, the cover done in a tasteful silver background with black print, which functions nicely as a frame for a black and white photograph of Zemgalis, who appropriately enough is found sitting in a white suit with a black tie before a chess set, the photograph's background itself split in black and white. The cover photograph is one of a dozen photographs appearing in the book, some in color, and including, for instance, Zemgalis playing Bogoljubow at Oldenburg 1949, Zemgalis and his wife, and Zemgalis facing Olaf Ulvestad during a four game match held in Seattle in 1952 (won by Zemgalis 3-1). The book is divided into two parts, the first running ninety some pages and including a running biography along with thirty-six annotated games. The second part runs fifty-six pages and gives another 154 games, unannotated. A listing of events, player index, and photo index round out the work. No opening index is given. In total the book offers 190 games in 160 pages.

Zemgalis was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1923, thirteen years before Mikhail Tal was born in the same city. The thirteen years difference in their birth might as well have been a thousand years, given the experience and choices the two faced. Tal was a small child at the start of World War II, and by the time he was eleven the war was over. Zemgalis was a teenager when the war began, and by 1940 had also won "the championship of Riga's prestigious First High School four years running." Zemgalis had opportunities to play quick chess with Vladimir Petrov, another exceptionally talented Latvian player, who shared first place with Flohr and Reshevsky at the very strong Kemeris 1937 tournament. For Petrov, the war also brought the end. He died tragically in a Soviet prison camp in 1943.

Later, in 1944, the Soviets returned to Latvia. Tal, at age eight, as a child, a pawn in the face of political maneuvering, would eventually be absorbed in the Soviet system, nurtured in his growth as a player, and allowed the opportunity to develop his talent under the auspices of a powerful, state supported system. Zemgalis, older, along with other Latvian chess players, saw the return of the Soviets as reason enough to flee West.

In 1946 "the West," for Zemgalis and many others like him, displaced persons one and all, turned out to be Germany. Ironically enough, the country responsible for the global upheaval that led to the Soviet Union making Latvia unbearable for

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Zemgalis also turned out to be the land of his sanctuary, at least for several years. There during the second half of the 1940s he met the likes of Bogoljubow, Ortvín Sarapu, and Fritz Saemisch. Incidentally, those interested in collecting the games of Bogoljubow will find here Zemgalis's two draws with the internationalist, at Hanua 1947 (H. Matisons Memorial) with White, after a 63 move fight, and at Oldenburg 1949, with Black, after a 69 move, fourteenth round game crucial to the outcome of that tournament. Oldenburg, as Donaldson rightly notes, was Zemgalis's greatest sporting achievement in chess. There, in a seventeen round event, he finished tied for first with Bogoljubow at 12-5 over players such as Rossolimo, Sarapu, Unzicker, and O'Kelly. The two Bogoljubow draws in this book are in fact rare finds. Neither appears, for instance, in Victor Charushin's exceptional CD on Bogoljubow, put out by Pickard & Son, even though that collection includes a staggering 1,247 games by Alekhine's old antagonist.

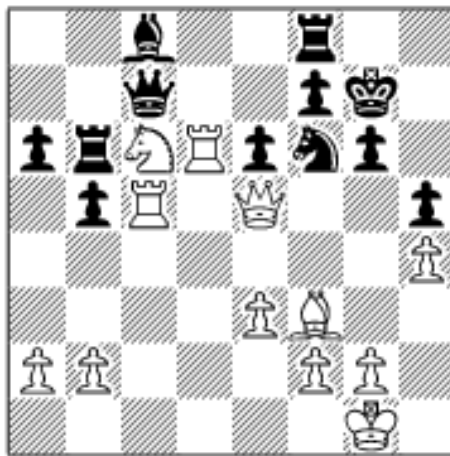


Photo: Zemgalis at the Augsburg 1946 tournament.

Here is a sample of Zemgalis's attacking style from this period, annotated by Donaldson specifically for the book:

Zemgalis – Braumanis [D63] Germany (Team Match), 1946

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 e6 4.Nc3 Nbd7 5.Bg5 Be7 6.e3 0-0 7.Rc1 c5 This is the move 7.Qc2 is designed to discourage, but it's not really that bad. **8.cxd5 Nxd5 9.Bxe7 Nxe7 10.Be2 cxd4?! 10...b6 11.0-0 Bb7 12.dxc5 Nxc5 13.b4 Ne4 14.Nxe4 Bxe4 15.Qa4** Geller - Larsen, Copenhagen (m) 1966, which *ECO* gives as slightly better for White. **11.Nxd4 Nf6 12.Qc2 a6 13.0-0 b5?! A better idea was 13...e5** dislodging the knight from the center. **14.Bf3 Rb8 15.Rfd1 Qb6 16.Ne4 Ned5 17.Nxf6+ Nxf6 18.Nc6** The ending after 18.Qc7 favors White, but the text is even stronger. **18...Rb7 19.Rd6 Qc7 20.Qc5 g6** Black wants some breathing space for his King, but the text creates weaknesses. **21.h4 Kg7 22.Qe5 h5** The text, played to stop h4-h5-h6, creates even more weaknesses around Black's King. **23.Rc5 Rb6**



24.Bxh5!! Kh7 The piece cannot be taken: 24...gxh5 25.Qg5+ Kh7 26.Qxf6. **25.Qxf6 Qxd6 26.Ne7!!** This brilliant move decides everything as Black is helpless against the threat of Bxg6+. **26...e5 27.Bxg6+ Kh6** Or 27...fxg6 28.Qxf8 Be6 29.Rc8! winning. **28.Qg5+ Kg7 29.Bf5+ Kh8 30.Rxc8 Rxc8 31.Nxc8 Qd1+ 32.Kh2 1-0**

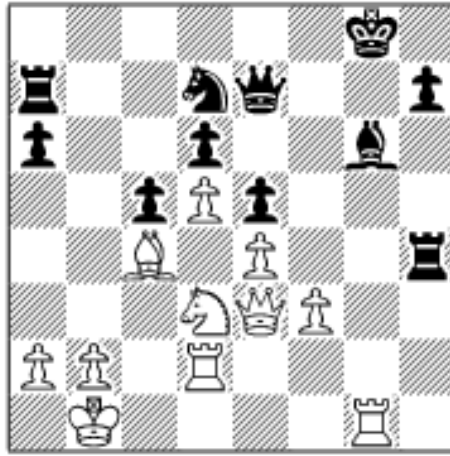
[*Elmars Zemgalis*, by John Donaldson, pp. 9–10]

Zemgalis would continue to play in European events through February 1951, at Stuttgart, where he dominated a small, eight round tournament, giving up only one draw. But in May 1952, the player originally from Riga found himself, with his wife, Cacilla, arriving in their new home: Seattle, Washington. Just how he happened to arrive in the United States' Northwest is a story in itself, and one well worth reading in the book. Zemgalis would eventually become a professor of mathematics at Highline Community College in Seattle, and the author of several textbooks in his field. His career flourishing, Zemgalis sadly enough found less and less time to play chess. Unlike his fellow Latvian, Tal, Zemgalis's fate had brought him to the western shores of the United States, a country rich in opportunity for him to build a solid life for himself and his family, but not fertile ground for developing to its fullest extent his chess talent. Though of course, this does not mean Zemgalis did not play chess in the United States. He did. For example, consider the following game, one played in a 1962 match against Victor Pupols. Zemgalis won the match 4½-3½:

Zemgalis – Viktors Popols [E81] Seattle Match, Game 4, 1962

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.f3 e5 6.Nge2 c6 7.Bg5 0-0 8.Qd2 a6 9.0-0-0 Qa5 10.Kb1 b5 11.Bxf6 Bxf6 12.Nd5 Qd8 13.Nxf6+ Qxf6 14.d5 c5 15.Nc1 Bd7 16.h4 Ra7 17.h5 Be8 18.Qe3 Qe7 19.g3 bxc4 20.Rd2 f5 21.hxg6 Bxg6 22.Bxc4 f4!?

This turns out to be too ambitious. Black had equal chances after 22...Qf6 or 22...Qf7. **23.gxf4 Rxf4 24.Nd3 Rh4 25.Rg1 Nd7?** Black could have kept the disadvantage to a minimum with 25...Kf8. The text allows White two ways to win.



26.Nb4! Elmars alertly spots his chance! He could have also won with 26.Nxc5 Nxc5 27.Qxc5 dxc5 28.d6+.
26...Nb6 27.Nc6 Qf6 28.Be2 Ra8? Viktors could still have put up resistance with 28...Rf7. The text move allows a double attack. **29.Qb3 Qf4** As 29...Nd7 runs into 30.Qb7.
30.Rc2 Qh2 31.Rgc1 1-0
 [Elmars Zemgalis, by John

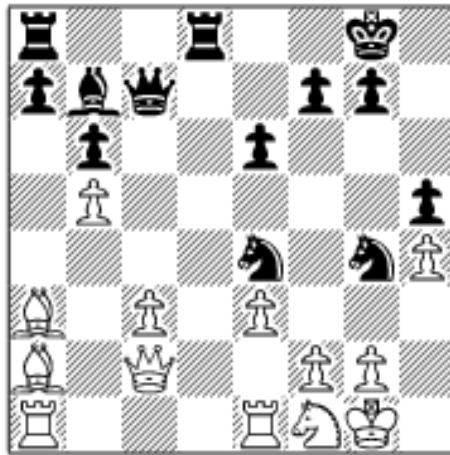
Donaldson, pp.95-96]

Here is another, earlier effort by Zemgalis in his adopted country, a game annotated by Zemgalis himself, and one played in the early rounds of Milwaukee 1953, a United States Open that saw the new emigrant in contention for the first ten rounds, before heat and illness overwhelmed him:

Pafnutieff - Zemgalis [E48] United States Open, Milwaukee, Round 2, 1953

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e3 Rubinstein's move was very fashionable at the time this game was played. **4...0-0 5.Bd3 d5 6.Nge2** Black obtains good play after 6.Nf3 with the line 6...c5 7.0-0 Nc6 8.a3 Bxc3 9.bxc3 dxc4 10.Bxc4 Qc7. **6...c5 7.0-0** The 1952 edition of *Modern Chess Openings* gives the line 7.a3 cxd4 8.axb4 dxc3 9.Nxc3 dxc4 10.Bxc4 Qxd1+ with equality. White seemingly strives for the same variation interposing 7.0-0 first, the difference will however soon become evident. **7...Nc6** Another idea would be Reuben Fine's suggestion 7...cxd4 8.exd4 dxc4 9.Bxc4 a6 10.a3 Be7 11.Be3 b5 12.Bd3 Bb7 =. In this variation White's 10.a3 is definitely inferior to both 10.Bf4 and 10.Qd3! as played in the match Najdorf - Reshevsky in 1953. **8.a3 dxc4 9.Bxc4 cxd4 10.axb4** This is somewhat dubious. Better was 10.exd4 Be7 11.Bf4! b6! with equality. **10...dxc3 11.bxc3** The endgame after 11.Qxd8 Rxd8 12.bxc3 Ne5 13.Bb3 is in Black's favor due to his control of the light squares. **11...Qc7 12.Ba3 Rd8 13.Qc2 Ne5!** The Black knight assumes a dominating position. **14.Ba2 b6! 15.b5** Played to prevent ...Ba6. **15...Bb7** It's too early for 15...Neg4 16.Ng3 h5 17.Rfd1 followed by Nf1 and adequate defense. **16.Ng3** White's position is dangerously exposed. The text move is directed against the threats of ...Be4 and ...Neg5. In view of what happens now 16.f3 seems to be the best defense,

although White still has difficulties after 16.f3 Nc4 17.Bxc4 Qxc4 18.Be7 Rd3 etc. **16...h5! 17.h4** If 17.h3 then 17...h4 18.Ne2 Be4 19.Qb2 Qb7 20.f3 Bxf3! 21.gxf3 Nxf3+ 22.Rxf3 Qxf3 23.Nd4 Qxe3+ 24.Qf2 Qxc3 25.Bb2 Qxh3 with an easy win. **17...Neg4! 18.Rfe1** Also 18.Rfd1 loses to 18...Nxe3 19.fxe3 Qxg3 20.Qf2 Qxf2+ 21.Kxf2 Ne4+ 22.Kf1 Nxc3 23.Rxd8+ Rxd8 24.Bc4 Bd5. **18...Ne4 19.Nf1** Capturing on e4 loses immediately: 19.Nxe4 Qh2+ 20.Kf1 Qh1+ 21.Ke2 Qxg2 winning.



19...Rd2! 20.Nxd2 Qh2+ 21.Kf1 Ng3+ 0-1 [*Elmars Zemgalis*, by John Donaldson, pp.78-80]

Through Donaldson's efforts, as well as the archival efforts of Zemgalis's biggest chess fan, his wife, Cacilia, we now have nearly 200 games played by this master who found his life a series of knight moves

across the board of World War II and post-war politics. And Donaldson makes a good case for Zemgalis having had sufficiently strong performances at Augsburg 1946 and Oldenburg 1949 to have warranted at least an International Masters title, and in all likelihood a Grandmaster one. That neither materialized for Zemgalis after FIDE began officially awarding titles in 1950, Donaldson finds "hard to fathom." That Zemgalis had no official state supporting his candidacy, and no federation officials actively advancing his cause, might well have had something to do with it. The absence of such titles may well be simply another unfortunate consequence of his being a displaced person, and in any event, certainly is not commentary on Zemgalis's talent or accomplishment at the board. Zemgalis was given a provisional rating by the USCF, a rating largely based on his achievement at Oldenburg, of 2624—good enough to rank fourth in the nation at the time, and surely somewhat suggestive of the depth of talent he brought to the game, in whichever country he happened to reside.

Could more have been done here? Of course. As Zemgalis, now seventy-seven, is still with us, one would have liked more details concerning the life of Donaldson's subject. Details only available to a biographer who can interview his subject. How did Zemgalis feel, in retrospect, about his transition as a displaced person, moving from Latvia to Germany and finally to the United States?

Does he ever regret not having had the opportunity to develop his chess talent to the fullest, as his move to the United States in the 1950s virtually guaranteed he would not? After all, during his five years in Germany, from 1946 through 1951, as Donaldson notes, Zengalis played in twelve master events, winning seven, finishing second in three, and gaining third in the two remaining events. And what of his impressions of some of his opponents? What, for instance, were his feelings when in 1944 he missed defeating Paul Keres, playing an inferior thirty-fifth move that lead to a draw eight moves later? (The game, with annotations, is the first game in the book.) What were his encounters with Bogoljubow like? And what are his impressions of United States players he met across the board now so many years ago? What of Dake? Of Ulvestad? Of Pupols? What of his decision to effectively retire from chess following the United States Open in 1966, when he was only forty-three years old? Had these and similar questions been explored in detail, the book would have been a richer text. This is not to condemn what has been done, for the book handles the material it includes nicely. It is merely to suggest that other avenues of approach might have been selected, ones that might have given a broader perspective to the man, in



addition to his games and chess career. *Photo: Zengalis playing against Bogoljubow at Oldenburg, 1949*

As the book runs 160 pages, and retails at \$16.00, the cost is certainly not exorbitant. Consider it this way: you wouldn't be able to take a friend to a modest dinner for much less than the cost of this book, and once you purchase it, you'll have the pleasure of meeting another person, a very talented person, through 190 of his creative efforts, in addition to learning something about his past. Nor will you be spending your money on creative efforts available elsewhere, either in book form or on database. Donaldson himself notes that a check of Mega Database 2000 produced by ChessBase revealed not one Zengalis game in a collection of 1.3 million. I can add that another monstrous database I checked on my own hardly did better, offering only one game by Zengalis. In short, it is more than likely that all 190 of these games will be new to you. And more than worth the investment, thanks to Donaldson's fine efforts with this volume.

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