

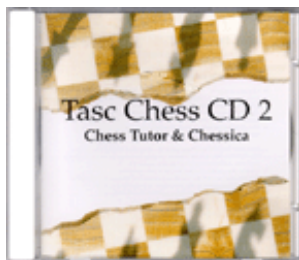


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Ratifying a Legend

Taylor Kingston

My Best Games, Vol. 1: Games with White, by Victor Korchnoi, 2001 Edition Olms, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Hardback, 208 pp., \$30.00

In these days when hyperbole is common, the term “living legend” is sometimes used rather loosely. In the case of Victor Korchnoi however, it is, even in its strictest sense, quite apt. Perhaps only one other chess master in history, Emanuel Lasker, has ever ranked so high for so long, remaining one of the world’s best well past the age when most players retire altogether. Though now 70, Korchnoi on the July 2001 FIDE list had a rating of 2617, 64th in the world. To put this in perspective, among FIDE’s top 80 no other player is within even 20 years of him, and of the top 100 only one is within 15. Yet he still plays regularly in major tournaments, and does well. For most of the past 50 years he has ranked among or near the world’s top ten, circa 1974-81 he was #2, surpassed only by Anatoly Karpov, and he is considered by some to be among the ten greatest players of all time.



Obviously a collection by such a player deserves serious attention. This volume consists of 50 games, annotated at length by Korchnoi. He plays White in all of them; a second volume of his games as Black will follow. They span his entire adult 20th-century career, fifty years, 1951-2000, and include wins over many of the greats of those years: Botvinnik, Geller, Karpov, Petrosian, Polugaevsky, Portisch, Reshevsky, Spassky, Tal, etc., as well as many currently active high-ranking younger GMs: Shirov, Seirawan, Piket, Bacrot, Short, Svidler, Ponomarev and others.

Strictly speaking, the word “best” in the title is perhaps somewhat misleading. Technical perfection was secondary to variety in Korchnoi’s selection criteria. Thus each decade is represented by about the same number of games, and a diversity of openings (16), and especially opponents (46), is seen (only three opponents appear more than once: Tal and Hübner twice, Karpov three times). The games have also been chosen for their fighting quality — no dull draws here, and thus some mistakes, by both Korchnoi and his opponents. So these may not be the most perfect of Korchnoi’s games in strict terms of strategic depth, technical precision or tactical brilliance, but such qualities are still abundantly present, and the variety and liveliness of the games enhance the collection. Some illustrative examples follow.

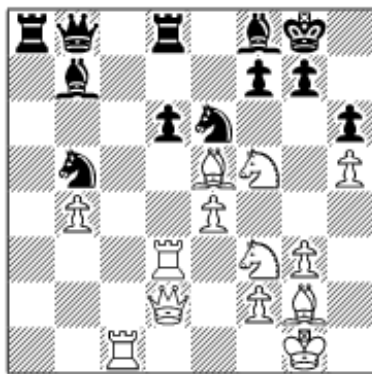
Whether by chance or design, flashy combinations are not much in evidence. This is perhaps due to the strength of Korchnoi’s opposition, or to the fact that he has always been a rather pragmatic, well-rounded player, not consciously striving for queen sacrifices or all-out kingside attacks. This one, Korchnoi-Filip, Stockholm 1962,



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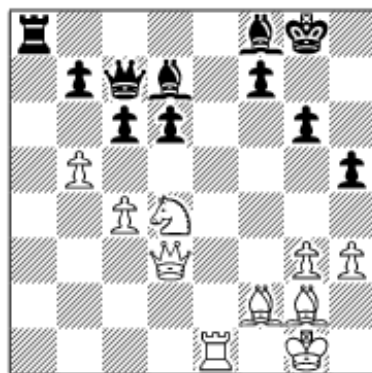


is one of the flashiest of the bunch: **32. Bxg7 Bxg7 33. Nxh6+ Bxh6 34. Qxh6 Bxe4 35. Re3 d5 36. Ng5! Qe5** (36...Nxg5 37. Qxg5+ Kh7 38. Rxe4) **37. Rxe4 Qxg5 38. Rxe6 Qxh6 39. Rxh6**, and White is up two pawns. This is fairly typical of the combinations in the collection: the result is not a dazzling mate but a won endgame. Thus the collection features tactics more as tools, rather than fireworks. Another example is Korchnoi-Hübner, Johannesburg 1981:



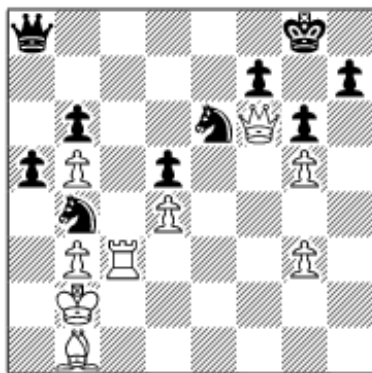
20. Rc6! – Nothing all that fancy; the rook is immune due to **20...Bxc6 21. Nxc6** and **22. Bxd5**, and by interfering with the bishop's defense of the Nd5, it forces the knight to move, thus exposing f7: **21...Nf6 22. Nxf7 Qxd4 22. Ng5+ Kh8 23. Bc3, 1-0**.

And this one is so straightforward as to be less a combination than just solid, instructive technique, as Korchnoi, already a piece ahead, simplifies to a won endgame.



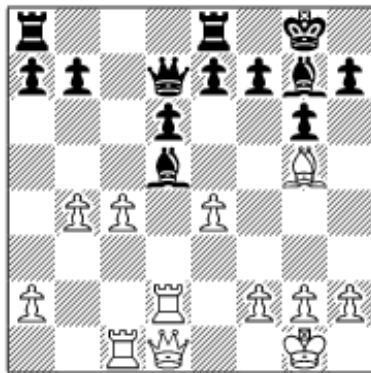
Korchnoi-Ivkov, Hastings 1955-56: **28. bxc6 bxc6 29. Nb5 Qb8 30. Nxd6 Qxd6 31. Qxd6 Bxd6 32. Rd1 Be6 33. Rxd6 Bxc4 34. Bd4 Be6 35. Bxc6 Rc8 36. h4, 1-0**.

A recurrent theme is Korchnoi's ability to set his opponent difficult problems, thereby increasing his practical winning chances even in positions that may not objectively be winning. A good example is Korchnoi-Petrosian, Moscow 1975:



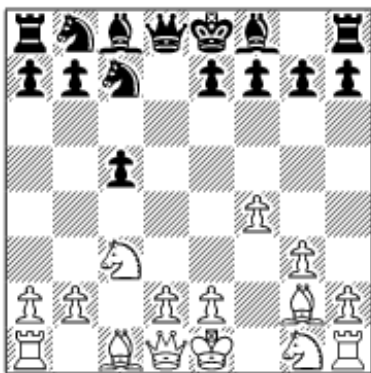
66. g4! Qe8? – In time trouble, Petrosian does not grasp Korchnoi's intent. Better was **66...Qb8 67. Ka1 Nf8** with drawing chances. **67. Qe5! Qd8?** – Still not sensing the danger; more tenacious was **67...Qf8**. **68. Bxg6! hxg6 69. Rh3** – Revealing the point of 66. g4. **69...Nd3+** (69...Ng7 70. Qh2 etc.) **70. Rxd3 Nxg5 71. Rc3 Ne4 72. Rh3 f6 73. Qh2 Kf7 74. Rh8, 1-0**.

At other points there is simply clear, straightforward instruction without tactical fireworks, as in this position,



where Korchnoi explains his choice of **19. Rxd5**: “The standard 19 exd5 would have given White a slight spatial advantage and pressure on the e-file. And the capture with the rook? In the absence of the knights and the light-square bishop, the rook on d5 is invulnerable and it will prevent the pawn thrusts ...a7-a5, ...f7-f5 or ...e7-e6.”

There is also strategic and psychological insight, as in this position, Korchnoi-Suetin, Leningrad 1953,



where Korchnoi comments on the move just played, **6. f2-f4**: “A chess player’s style changes with age. Young grandmasters normally have a leaning toward sharp, tactical play. Without especially bothering to search for the strategic subtleties of the position, they aim to create complication situations ... With the years, and with experience, a player acquires positional feeling ... [6. f4 prevents] Black from setting up a strong pawn centre by ...e7-e5. The move is purposeful, but pretentious. In the middlegame White will possibly be able to create an attacking position on the kingside;

possibly but not definitely. On the other hand, with the disappearance of his c-pawn and the premature advance of his f-pawn, White is bound soon to have problems on the central files, and if nothing comes of his attack, the d- and e-pawns will be incurable weaknesses in his position.”

It appears that many games in this collection were originally annotated shortly after they were played, in some cases decades ago, but Korchnoi has taken the trouble to update some of them, often quite self-critically, e.g. Korchnoi-Robatsch, Havana 1963,



where commenting on his **10. Rc1** he writes:

“I did not want to play 10 e4 – after 10...Bxc3 11 bxc3 dxe4 12 Bxe4 0-0 13 Re1 Nf6 if Black had succeeded in developing his queenside, then White’s pawn weaknesses would have told.

“These comments were written in 1964. They reek of dogmatism, and also, generally speaking, of poor chess understanding. It is surprising that they were written by a player who had already (!) twice been USSR champion. Pawn weaknesses are indeed

important, but a spatial advantage – is it really so insignificant? I think that now I would have played 10 e4!?”

Korchnoi’s personality comes through strongly in the annotations: his confidence, his fighting spirit, and his love of the game. In the foreword he writes “Chess is my life, and these games are fragments of my life. And naturally I wanted to accompany each such fragment with a conversation with chess enthusiasts.” The games therefore have an aspect of conversational interest, in terms of instruction as we have already seen, and also in terms of history. Here for example Korchnoi describes his souring relationships with Soviet officialdom:

“In this 1974 Candidates Match the Soviet authorities chose Anatoly Karpov as

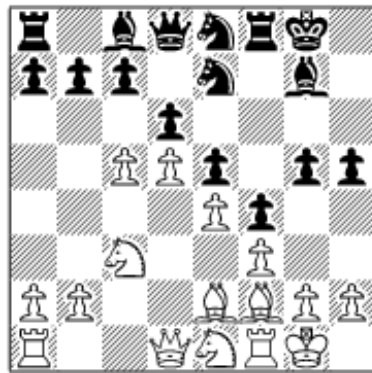
their favorite ... In general I had several helpers during the match, but for this game I prepared with only one of them – David Bronstein; the others knew nothing about what and how I was intending to play. In the atmosphere of smoldering hostility, created by the Soviet state authorities around me and my camp (how far-sighted of them: two years before my flight from that country, they were already treating me as a foreigner!), I needed to adopt extreme measures to avoid any leak of information.”

There are also many comments about his fellow GMs, some complimentary, others critical: “[Ljubojevic is a] grandmaster of distinctive chess thinking and striking tactical talent ...” — “I would characterise this move as a display of nihilism, typical of Hübner’s mentality in general.” — “According to information published in 1999, in order to ensure victory for Karpov [in the 1978 world championship match], eighteen KGB officers were sent to The Philippines.” — “Incidentally, I do not think that computerised commentaries à la Hübner or Khalifman are an adornment to chess, or that they are useful to chess players. A player should develop his tactical intuition, whereas catalogues of variations try to replace this with a total calculation of the possibilities.”

In terms of openings, Korchnoi rarely plays 1. e4, preferring 1. c4, 1. d4 and 1. Nf3. Thus of the 50 games, ten are the English, ten various forms of Queen’s Gambit, seven King’s Indians, and four Catalans, with a smattering of Dutch, Nimzo-Indian, and other asymmetrical d-pawn lines. Three Sicilians, two Frenches and one Caro-Kann somehow snuck in; there are no double e-pawn games. Korchnoi is not a highly book-oriented player; he trust his own judgment more than established theory and frequently varies fairly early.

One of his comments on an opening is both amusing and revealing. A 1997 game with Bacrot began 1. c4 e5 2. g3 c6 3. d4 e4. Korchnoi says “I have to admit that at the board I was surprised that 3...e4 was possible ... And then a few days later I remembered that in 1981 ... I myself played e5-e4 against Pal Benko, and that I even won that game!” In other words, as the clichéd old boast goes, Korchnoi has “forgotten more about chess than you’ll ever know.”

The book is on the whole well written. Genna Sosonko contributes a thoughtful preface. Korchnoi’s language is often colorful, as in the comments on this position:



“What does Black’s play in this variation remind me of? In the Second World War, the Germans, and then also the Russians, employed the following method of warfare: after getting drunk before a battle, silently, with their weapons at the ready, standing up straight and making no effort to conceal themselves, they would automatically advance towards the entrenched enemy ... This was the so-called ‘psychological attack’. But look at the board! ... If the opponent does not flinch ... then the checkmating of the bare black king will begin.”

Now and then some of the prose does not quite ring true, as with the word “automatically” in the above passage, or this *non sequitur*: “One has to give Karpov his due. It extremely rarely occurs to him to create something new on the chessboard.” Still, on the whole translator/editor Ken Neat has done a good job.

There are some other, more important errors. In this position,



commenting on **8. d4**, Korchnoi says "The idea of the Réti Opening in its pure form is 8 d3 0-0 9 Nbd2, then Rc1-c2 and Qa1. In this way Richard Réti gained a number of victories, including one over the then World Champion Capablanca." Accurate on theory, wrong on history. Réti did defeat Capablanca once (New York 1924), but not with those moves. In that same tournament he did play the moves Korchnoi describes, but against Lasker, not Capablanca, and Réti lost that game.

At other points the annotations err by omission.

For example, after the moves 1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 d5 4. Bg5 h6 5. Bxf6 Korchnoi says "As is well known, 5 Bh4 will not do in view of 5...Bb4+ 6 Nc3 dxc4, when White loses a pawn without any compensation for it. However, theory expressed its opinion on this at the start of the 20th century, and by the start of the 21st century it had become seriously antiquated." The new theoretical opinion is never explained. Or after 1. Nf3 Nf6 2. g3 d5 3. Bg2 c6 4. 0-0 Bf5 5. d3 h6 6. c4 e6 7. Be3 Korchnoi says "one cannot help but come to the conclusion that this position is already a critical one for Black." Reasons for this conclusion are not made very clear.

These are relatively minor glitches, however, and there are few of them. This is, on the whole, one of the best books so far this year, the most enjoyable and instructive compilation by an active player I have seen since Vishy Anand's 1998 collection. If you are not familiar with Korchnoi's games, this is an excellent way to make his acquaintance. If you know him already, you will learn more from and about him. Any chess library will be enhanced by this book, a collection that further ratifies the stature of an already legendary figure.

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