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## High in Quality,

## Low on History

### Taylor Kingston

*I Play Against Pieces*, by Svetozar Gligoric, 2002  
Batsford Ltd., Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback,  
288pp., \$22.95

Yugoslavian grandmaster Svetozar Gligoric (born 1923, Belgrade) is one of the major figures of 20th-century chess. Circa 1945-1970 he was not only the best player in his own country, winning its championship 11 times, but he also had excellent results internationally, playing in more than 70 tournaments and taking about 20 first prizes.

Along with Fischer, Larsen, Portisch, and a small handful of others he was one of the few non-Russians who could hold his own against the Soviet Empire at the height of its power, notching numerous wins against their top GMs and ranking among the world's top 10 through much of the 1950s and '60s. He played in seven FIDE Interzonals and was a Candidate three times, in 1952, 1958, and 1968. In a career spanning over 50 years, he has played every world champion from Euwe to Kasparov, and has about two dozen victories against them collectively. Elo's *The Rating of Chessplayers* puts his 5-year peak rating at 2620, and Divinsky's *Life Maps of the Great Chess Masters* lists him among the top 50 players of all time.





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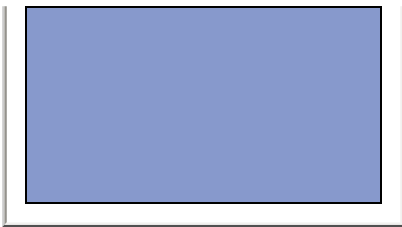
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This version of Gligoric's autobiography and game collection *I Play Against Pieces* is the book's third edition. The first, in Russian with 105 games, came out in 1981; the second edition, published 1989 in his native Serbo-Croatian, had 120 games. This English edition, translated by Biljana and Zoran Ilic, has 130 games dating from 1939 to 2001.

The autobiographical section is rather slight, only six pages. For history buffs it is a definite disappointment. Firstly, there are no proper career records. No tables listing Gligoric's full tournament and match results, merely casual summaries by venue and date of his first prizes, championships of Yugoslavia, and "other memorable results." A thorough career record chart used to be virtually obligatory for this kind of single-player collection, yet increasingly it is absent. Of the anthologies we've seen from recent years, by or about Gligoric, Korchnoi, Anand, Sokolov, Gufeld, Spassky, Euwe, Botvinnik and Bronstein, over half (the first five named) had nothing of the sort. What is given fails to make clear Gligoric's full stature. He had, for example, an even lifetime score (+2 -2 = 6) against Botvinnik, was nearly even (+6 -7 = 25) with Smyslov, defeated Fischer four times (a number exceeded only by Geller and Spassky), and beat the "unbeatable" Petrosian *seven times*, which is exceeded only by Korchnoi, Spassky, and Fischer. At his peak, circa 1956-1959, he may well have been #3 in the world, according to David Bronstein. In 1970 he was still strong enough that he played 5th board for the Rest of the World team in the historic match against the USSR.

Secondly, few chess figures could write more interesting memoirs than Gligoric, who for five decades had major roles as a player, journalist, and FIDE administrator. Yet for "autobiography" we get hardly more than an encyclopedia article. A pity. Gligoric was, for example, on the appeals committee of the 1981 Karpov-Korchnoi world championship match and for Fischer-Spassky 1992, and was chief arbiter for 12 FIDE Candidates matches and



the aborted 1984-85 Karpov-Kasparov match. What he might tell us about these, especially the last named, must be considerable, but all we read is “in 1992 I decided to reject invitations of this kind for the rest of my life. To use an English expression, it was not really ‘my cup of tea.’” One can only hope that writing is still Gligoric’s cup of tea, and that he will eventually write at greater length about the chess history he has seen. What we see in *Pieces* is merely a bare-bones summary enlivened by a few personal details, anecdotes and opinions, supplemented with occasional random reminiscences dispersed throughout the book.

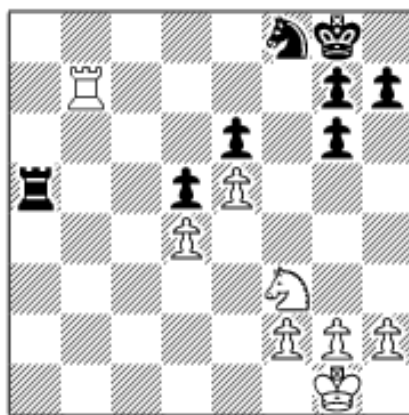
The games receive better and far more detailed treatment. Gligoric has a great store to draw from, having played probably more serious games than anyone else of his generation except Korchnoi. As he himself notes “In the period 1945-1975 I travelled and played perhaps more than anyone else.” He also played quite well: his victims here include Tal, Fischer, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Euwe, Keres, Petrosian, Geller, Taimanov, Najdorf, Ivkov, Larsen, Portisch, Szabo, Hort, Unzicker, Miles, Andersson, Timman and many other top-echelon GMs.

The 130 games are given an unusual but logical organization: not the customary chronological order, but by opening. 27 different openings are seen, ranging from “museum pieces” such as the King’s Gambit and Vienna, to more modern King’s Indians, Sicilians and Grünfelds. Gligoric plays White in 87 games, Black in 43. The selections make Gligoric’s theoretical preferences and strengths clear. In some lines, notably the Ruy Lopez and Sicilian, he seems happy to play either color, but in others: the French, Benoni, Nimzo-Indian, Petroff and various Queen’s Gambits, we see him almost solely on the white side, while in the King’s Indian and English he is usually Black. Statistically the openings break down as follows: 20 King’s Indian, 17 Nimzo-Indian, 15 Benoni, 13 Grünfeld, 8 Sicilian, 7 Spanish, 6 Queen’s Gambit Accepted, 5 Queen’s Gambit Declined (Orthodox), 4

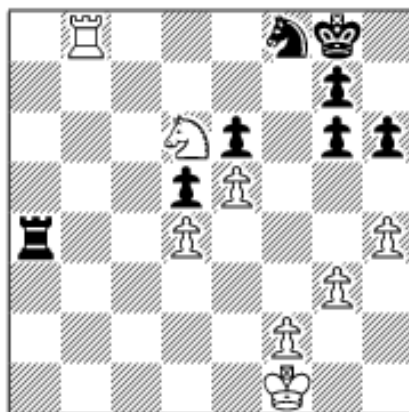
Slav, 5 Semi-Slav, 4 QGD Tarrasch, 5 English, 5 French, 2 each King's Gambit Accepted, Petroff, and Bogo-Indian, and one each Queen's Indian, Old Indian, Vienna, Pirc, Caro-Kann, Catalan, Budapest, Bird, Dutch, and Veresov. Within each opening the games appear in chronological order.

The games are quite varied. Some go to considerable length, others are short (including a demolition of world champion Smyslov in only 17 moves). Gligoric's style is eclectic and hard to categorize, and the collection shows him able to win in many different ways: by positional maneuver, by attack, by defense, by opening preparation and innovation, by endgame technique, etc. A few samples:

Gligoric-Andersson, Skopje Olympiad, 1972, shows a relentless endgame squeeze:



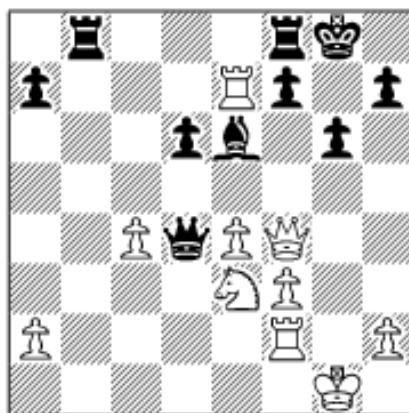
**30.h4! Ra4 31.g3 h6**  
**32.Kg2 Rc4 33.Kf1 Rc8**  
**34.Nd2** — Beginning an excellent maneuver to plant the knight in the heart of Black's position. **34...Rd8**  
**35.Nb3 Rd7 36.Rb8 Kf7**  
**37.Nc5 Ra7 38.Nb7 Kg8**  
**39.Nd6 Ra4?!**



In time pressure, Black switches from passive defense to active counterplay, but it's too late. **40.Rb7! Rxd4 41.Ne8 Re4**  
**42.Rxg7+ Kh8 43.f4 Rc4**  
**44.Re7, 1-0.** After 45.Nf6 and 46.Rf7 Black will be virtually paralyzed, and the advance of White's king

will settle matters.

Teschner-Gligoric, Helsinki Olympiad 1952, shows Gligoric in attacking mode:



**23...g5!! 24.Qxg5+ Kh8  
25.Nc2 Bh3!., 0-1.**

Gligoric was noted for careful opening preparation, especially in the King's Indian and Sicilian Defense, his mainstays as Black, and in the black side of the Ruy Lopez, all of which he

studied in great depth. However, he was also able to deal with opening novelties at the board. This is seen in Gligoric-Bobotsov, Hastings 1959-60, which also illustrates the instructive quality of his annotations.

After **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Bg5 e6 7.f4 h6 8.Bh4 Be7 9.Bf3 Qc7 10.0-0-0 Nbd7** this position was reached,



which was new at the time due to the interpolation **7...h6 8.Bh4**. Gligoric writes "In this version the continuation **11.g4** is pointless because of **11...g5 12.fxg5 Ne5**, so it took me a lot of time to find a logical solution based on the weakened g6 square —

which makes an important difference to the position!"  
Play continued **11.Bd3 b5 12.e5 Bb7**



**13.Nxe6!! fxe6 14.Bg6+ —**

Now the reader sees what Gligoric meant by “the weakened g6 square.”

**14...Kf8** — “On the d8 square the king would be exposed also to the white rook along the d-file:

**14...Kd8 15.Qh3 dxe5**

**16.Qxe6 e4 [or 16...Bxg2**

**17.Bf5! – TK] 17.Bxf6 gxf6 18.Rxd7+ Qxd7 19.Rd1**

**etc.” 15.exf6! Bxf3 16.fxe7+ Kg8 17.gxf3 Nf6 18.Bxf6**

**gxf6 19.e8=Q+ Rxe8 20.Bxe8** — With a rook and two minor pieces for the queen, White eventually won in 49 moves. This game shows that Gligoric was, to use Hans Ree’s phrase, a “hot logic” player, i.e. he would undertake what the logic of the position indicated, not balking at the prospect of difficult complications.

The annotations are aimed at players of at least average strength; this is not a book for novices needing instruction in fundamentals. Openings get varying treatment. Some are glossed over with little comment, others are discussed in terms of specific innovations, usually around moves 10-15. Then at times Gligoric goes into extensive tactical and strategic detail, especially in the King’s Indian. The bulk of his analysis is concentrated on the late opening, and on middle-game complications. Endgames get less attention, the last 15-20 moves often passing without comment. Though not overly detailed, the annotations are adequate and interesting. They are of the sort that does not provide complete explanations on a silver platter, but encourages the reader to investigate further.

We do see one shortcoming: often Gligoric has not bothered to revise his old notes where appropriate. For example, annotating a 1971 game that opened **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.f3 0-0 6.Be3**, he says “To

carry out ...c7-c5 Black would now have to spend time on preparations ... Going ahead anyway with an immediate 6...c5 and sacrificing a pawn, was nicely met in the game Karpov-Barle, Ljubljana 1975 ...”. Yes, that was the view in the 1970s, but today 6...c5 is a standard line against the Saemisch KID and Black is considered to have good play for the pawn.

Another such case makes Gligoric appear to contradict himself. Two games in the Semi-Slav chapter begin with the Reynolds line of the Meran variation, **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 c6 4.e3 Nbd7 5.Bd3 Ngf6 6.Nc3 dxc4 7.Bxc4 b5 8.Bd3 a6 9.e4 c5 10.d5 c4**, reaching this position:



Against Ljubojevic at Linares 1981, Gligoric here played **11.dxe6**, commenting “Necessary, because on 11.Bc2 Nc5! Black wouldn’t have any problems.” Yet just three pages later, we see the 1997 game Gligoric-Blagojevic proceed **11.Bc2 Qc7** with

no comment on either move. Presumably the reason is that in the late 1980s the theoretical opinion of 11...Nc5 changed from “!” to “?!”, but Gligoric fails to explain this, leaving the reader mystified as to why he did not play a move he deemed necessary.

The translation is satisfactory. A few malapropisms crop up, viz. “Usually White has played 9.h3 ... or the equally less efficient 9.Bf1,” and “motive” is continually misused for “motif,” but compared to most efforts we’ve seen from eastern Europe, this one reads well. We caught one factual error: a photo showing Gligoric at Los Angeles 1963 (first Piatigorsky Cup) gives the year as 1965. However, such problems are minor, and detract little from what is intended as a

game collection and not a history text.

The concluding chapter is a summary of Gligoric's contributions to modern opening theory. Their number is quite impressive, as is their logic and originality. Something similar might be said of Gligoric's chess career: impressive in both quantity and quality. Though not everything one might wish for, *I Play Against Pieces* is a good portrait of one of the most important chess masters of the past half-century, containing many fine games worth studying for both instruction and pleasure. Now if Gligoric would just write a proper memoir, he might do as much for chess history as great as he has for opening theory.

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by Svetozar Gligoric

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