



SKITTLES ROOM

The Chess Cafe

E-mail Newsletter

Each week, as a service to thousands of our readers, we send out an e-mail newsletter, *This Week at The Chess Cafe*.

To receive this *free* weekly update, type in your email address and click Subscribe.

That's all there is to it! And, we do not make this list available to anyone else.



Yuri Averbakh: An Interview with History

Part 1

by Taylor Kingston

Russian grandmaster Yuri Lvovich Averbakh is a very important figure in Soviet chess history. Born in Kaluga, about 100 miles southwest of Moscow, in 1922, Averbakh attained the USSR master title in 1943, and the FIDE GM title in 1952. Very few players have left the mark on the game that he has. He won the Championship of Moscow in 1949, 1950, and 1962, and played in 16 Soviet Championships, winning the title in 1954, coming 2nd in 1956 and 4th in 1958. He played in the famous Zürich Candidates Tournament of 1953, and has at various times defeated such greats as Botvinnik, Euwe, Korchnoi, Petrosian, Keres, Smyslov, Bronstein, Taimanov, Geller, Kotov, Polugaevsky, Najdorf, and Larsen. According to Elo's *The Rating of Chess Players* his 5-year peak rating was 2615, and in Divinsky's *Life Maps of the Great Chess Masters* he is ranked among the 30 best players of all time.

In addition to his accomplishments at the board, Averbakh is a respected FIDE arbiter, a judge of chess composition, an author (his 5-volume *Comprehensive Chess Endings* is a classic of chess literature), an editor (of *Shakmaty v SSSR* and its post-Soviet incarnation *Chess in Russia*) and an administrator, serving as president of the Soviet

Chess Federation 1972-1977. In short, few men had a more influential role in Soviet chess, and perhaps no one else now living has a greater firsthand knowledge of that era. This writer was therefore delighted and honored when presented with the opportunity to interview Averbakh when he visited the United States at the end of May 2002.

The following transcript was edited slightly for continuity, and to clarify Averbakh's sometimes problematic English, but otherwise it is verbatim as it occurred. A few [*italicized comments*] have been inserted by the interviewer where appropriate.

Taylor Kingston: Grandmaster Averbakh, I have been studying chess history for much of the last 30 or 40 years, so I have been very eager to talk to you. You probably know as much as any living man on the subject of Soviet chess. I have heard that you have written some memoirs. Is that true?

Yuri Averbakh: Yes, it's true, but they are not yet published. I have already a contract with our firm in Moscow to publish these memoirs, and I should finish it some time around September. It is already about two-thirds written; I only want to make some small corrections.

TK: And this is a different book from your recent games collection?

YA: Yes, but now I will publish in Moscow a games collection together with some memoirs, and then, only memoirs. The name of my memoirs will be *Chess and System*, by which I mean the Soviet totalitarian system. Or perhaps *Chess in the USSR*, I cannot say. This is my idea: to try to explain to people what was going in our country, that was connected with chess. (*Photograph: Yuri Averbakh*)



TK: I'm sure there will be quite a lot of interest in that.

YA: I hope!

TK: I have also heard that there is opposition to your book in some quarters. Correct me if I am wrong, but I have heard that members of Botvinnik's family are against this book being published, and have threatened legal action.

YA: No, no, there are no such things. Botvinnik's nephew published only an article, a letter. It was in 1998, in *Chess in Russia*, when I was editor of that magazine, which now is no longer published. I published his letter, and my own reply, where I questioned his idea, that when speaking of a great chess player, it is necessary to say only good things, or nothing. I said if that was the case, history would have us all looking better than we did when we were actually here. In my book I publish only what I heard and saw. I have some documents to prove what I say, which is important.

TK: Yes, in chess "history" many things have been said, for which there was no documentation.

YA: That is the point. Somebody says that somebody said etc. etc., and it is impossible to prove or to refute.

TK: Speaking of your memoirs, is there any particularly memorable episode that sticks in your mind?

YA: Well, first of all, I wanted to start from before the Revolution, what was the real situation in Russian chess before the First World War, to establish that we already had good traditions in chess. And secondly, I try to explain why chess was so popular in our country, what was the reason for it. And of course, I will tell some stories connected with the game, connected with various chess-related struggles and questions. It is very funny, you know, that chess composition is so very far from normal life, yet a number of our chess composers were persecuted in the time of the big terror.

TK: Yes, I have heard of that, for example from Milan Vukcevic [*a Yugoslavian-American GM composer*].

YA: Now I want to write about all of them, tell their real stories, what really happened. I believe it is important to inform people in the West, because they did not know what really happened. Milan would only have heard about what happened, while I show what really happened.

TK: This would have been when, in the 1930s?

YA: It was from the very beginning of the 1930s, all through the time of “big terror,” from the '30s thru the '40s. And then of course I continue the story during the war, after the war, step by step I try to tell about the development of chess in our country.

TK: It sounds very interesting. Switching now to another question, this involves a tournament in which you played, the 1953 Neuhausen-Zürich Candidates Tournament. There was an article recently by David Bronstein ...

YA: Yes, I read it.

TK: I figured you were familiar with it. He said that there was a delegation of officials there: Dmitry Postnikov, Igor Bondarevsky, and a KGB officer named Moshintsev, and that they had two goals. The main one was to make sure that Reshevsky did not win the tournament and challenge Botvinnik, and they also ...

YA: No, I will try to explain. These questions do not involve me directly, because I was playing my own chess. I lost to Reshevsky, by the way, and nobody blamed me. Anyway, these people from the sports committee, and from the KGB, and also Bondarevsky, who was the main trainer, the main coach of our team, they were assisting players from the USSR. They wanted to help our people.

I heard this story about Bronstein, that they told him Geller will make a draw with him, and they did not tell Geller, and Geller won the game against Bronstein. I doubt this is a real story.

TK: So you do not agree with Bronstein's view of the tournament? He has described it as 'a splinter in his heart,' as something that bothered his conscience. Do you not agree with his interpretation of the events there?

YA: Not completely. No, because I have known Bronstein so long. Sometimes, for instance, he may speak about his match with Botvinnik, and he says he did not want to win this match, or some such thing. He may not be truthful every time. I cannot say, or course, exactly how much, but what he says is not 100% true, about anything, really. This is my experience based on many contacts with him. Let us say, he cannot be 100% objective; this is the point.



USSR Championship, Moscow, 1951.

Left to right Ragozin, Geller, Botvinnik, Suetin, Averbakh

Photograph courtesy the Edward Winter Collection.

TK: Bronstein has raised a lot of points. I don't know if you are familiar with his book *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

YA: I'm sorry, no. But I have heard about it, and now it will be published in Russian, in about three or four months. His memoirs and mine will be published by the same publishing house.

TK: It came out about seven years ago in this country. Going back a few years from Neuhausen-Zürich, it discusses the 1950 Budapest Candidates' tournament ...

YA: Yes, I was there. I was a second for Lilienthal.

TK: Ah, yes, Andor Lilienthal. Now, Isaac Boleslavsky was leading late in the tournament, by a pretty good margin. Then, says Bronstein in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Boleslavsky had a talk with Boris Vainstein, and after that he *slowed down* and allowed Bronstein to tie him for first place. Then of course they had a playoff match, which Bronstein won, and he went on to challenge Botvinnik. Why would Boleslavsky agree to slow down, when he was winning the tournament?

YA: Yes, I understand. You know, Boleslavsky was a very good chess player, but he was not a fighter, and because of this, he had not very good results against Botvinnik [$+0 -7 =4$ through 1950]. Botvinnik was a killer in chess. And Boleslavsky was afraid he had not much chance to win against Botvinnik. And so together, Boleslavsky, Bronstein, and Vainstein, they developed an idea: to try to organize a triple-match, between Botvinnik, Boleslavsky and Bronstein.

TK: A three-man, triangular tournament.

YA: Yes, a three-way tournament. But, based on what I knew of Botvinnik, I believe it was impossible. First of all, because it was against FIDE regulations. I do not know, I can only imagine that Vainstein persuaded Boleslavsky that it was possible. Yet it seems clearly true; you could see that he made only two draws in the last rounds. Especially in the last round, because he played Stahlberg, he got a very good position with White, and then he proposed a draw on the 16th move. And of course after that, Bronstein could take risks; nobody was close behind him, he could try his best to win against Keres. And he won, with a pawn sacrifice in the opening.

TK: And so Boleslavsky was persuaded by Vainstein, but the plan Vainstein was trying to cook up never had any real chance?

YA: Yes, it was a real mistake by all of them, because afterwards the decision was made to organize a Boleslavsky-Bronstein match, without Botvinnik.

TK: I believe there was a lot of dislike, a lot of animosity between Vainstein and Botvinnik. Why was that?

YA: Yes, they were enemies. First of all, because during the war Vainstein was a colonel in the KGB, and at the same time he was president of our chess federation. For example in 1943, when I played well in the Moscow championship and was awarded the master title, Vainstein was the president of the federation. When the war was over, Vainstein was strongly against a match between Botvinnik and Alekhine, because he believed Alekhine should be persecuted.

TK: He felt that Alekhine was a traitor to the USSR?

YA: Yes. And Botvinnik made every effort to get Vainstein discharged from his position, and he eventually succeeded. And I believe from that, they became enemies. And by the way, in his memoirs, Botvinnik gives a very poor opinion of Vainstein. And Vainstein, in the last articles he wrote before he died, expressed his own very low opinion of Botvinnik.

TK: I'd like to go back a few years further now. Hague-Moscow 1948: there has long been the suspicion that Paul Keres was coerced to lose to Botvinnik in that tournament, so that Botvinnik would be assured of winning the world championship.

YA: That is something very difficult to prove, either side is very difficult to prove. Of course, it is rather funny that Keres lost four games, then won the last one when the contest was over, when it was certain that Botvinnik would win the tournament. But we cannot prove anything from this.

TK: Well, there has been some evidence that has recently surfaced. For example, do you know the British historian Ken Whyld?

YA: Oh, yes, he is my friend. We are members together of an association of historians.

TK: Keres played in a tournament at Hastings, England, in

1964, and he stayed with Whyld at that time. The two of them had some private time together, and Whyld asked him this same question, “Did you purposely lose any games to Botvinnik at Hague-Moscow?”. Keres said no, he had not purposely tried to lose, but he had been told that if Botvinnik did not win the world championship, it must not be due to anything Keres did.

The other main bit of testimony that has come up is an interview Botvinnik gave in 1991 to the Dutch journalist Max Pam, with Genna Sosonko translating. Botvinnik was asked a similar question, and he replied “Yes, I have experienced myself that orders were given.” He said that orders came from Stalin himself, that Smyslov and Keres should perhaps lose to Botvinnik to make it easier for him to win the world title. Botvinnik claimed, though, that he refused to go along with this; he considered it an insult.

YA: You know, first of all, I don’t believe that Stalin would give such a recommendation, myself. It would be completely out of character. If it was given, it could not have been given by Stalin. I believe the chairman of a sport committee might have done it, or somebody else, but not Stalin. First of all, Stalin was not much interested in chess. His favorite sport was wrestling. But people in sports committees, sometimes they are anxious, because for them, you know, their position depends on the result. If results are good, they get a promotion; if results are bad, they can be fired. But I do not think conditions were such that Keres intentionally lost four games in a row. I don’t think so.

You know, there was a certain mental weakness in Keres, a definite mental weakness. If you see, for example, Keres’ game against Botvinnik in the Absolute Championship of 1941, you could see that Keres was a very poor psychologist. And Botvinnik was very strong in such things. Maybe Keres felt some pressure, but I cannot say for sure. I was sometimes rather close to Keres, for example we played together in Budapest 1970. Keres won five games in a row, and then he became ill and had to go to bed, but despite that he started to

make draws, and he succeeded in winning this tournament, practically from his bed.

And by the way, Keres was not a big talker; he did not like to speak much. You know, this is typical for people from the north, including Estonians, they don't talk much.

TK: So, let's assume that Botvinnik was telling the truth, or believed he was telling the truth about "Stalin's orders ...".

YA: Yes, he believed, but I do not believe it really happened.

TK: So you think perhaps someone on the sports committee might have said "This is Stalin's wish," though it was not officially so?

YA: Yes, I believe that is at least near to the truth, let us say.

TK: Then let me ask you to speculate, perhaps. Would you agree that Keres was not so desirable, in the eyes of the Politburo or the Communist Party, as a world champion compared to Botvinnik, since Botvinnik was a staunch Communist, while Keres was an Estonian who had played in Nazi-organized tournaments, and that sort of thing ...

YA: Let me say that for the people on top, the #1 was Smyslov. They preferred Smyslov to be world champion, because he was clearly Russian in his nationality, while Botvinnik was Jewish. Botvinnik did prove himself to be a "real" Communist, and many people now consider him a Stalinist, really. But I don't think they necessarily thought of Botvinnik in that way then.

TK: Supposing Keres had somehow managed to win in 1948, do you think he would have suffered any consequences?

YA: Difficult to say. What I know, and what I have written, I will tell you. I had a friend, since passed away, who was in the Soviet marines. As you may know, in the war, the marines took Tallinn, capital of Estonia, from the sea. Many of the soldiers in that invasion had papers, orders, to arrest various important men of Estonia. And my friend had orders to arrest Keres.

TK: What was this man's name?

YA: His name was Barkan. Later he became the champion of the USSR in high diving. Barkan himself told me this. But Keres was not in Tallinn at that time, and so was not arrested. By the way, I told this story to the Estonian master Heuer [*A friend of Keres, who has written a lot about Keres and is at work on a Keres biography*]. I don't know if he has put it in his book [*It is mentioned in a Heuer article, New In Chess #4, 1995, p. 82*]. Heuer found it very interesting, but he asked me "Have you any papers proving it?". I had to say no, I had only Barkan's word.

TK: Heuer mentions that in October 1945, Keres had his house confiscated by Soviet authorities. Supposedly this was due to his being confused with another man, one Robert Keres. I wondered if Keres ever got his house back, do you know?

YA: Toward the end of 1945, we had our trade union team championship in Moscow. What I remember is that Keres was at that time in Moscow, taking with him certain papers everywhere he went. At that time, he did not play; I believe they did not want him to play in our championship. They did not want him to play in Groningen in 1946 [*A major tournament, won by Botvinnik just ahead of Euwe. Keres was denied permission to go.*]. But instead he was sent to the Georgian championship, where he played *hors concours*. I believe by then he had the support of the top people in the Estonian Communist Party.

TK: Such as Nikolai Karotamm?

YA: Yes. I believe that Karotamm's support was very important, that this Georgian tournament was organized especially for Keres, and secondly, after this tournament he was, shall we say, clear. Before that, he had been under suspicion.

Another thing, which I told to Heuer, maybe you will find it

interesting. Maybe 20, 25 years ago, the chairman of our sport committee, Mr. Romanov, told me in a private conversation that in 1946 or thereabouts, he was invited to meet with Molotov [*Vyacheslav Molotov, Soviet foreign minister and one of the highest-ranking officials of the government at that time*], because Keres wrote a letter to Molotov.

TK: Yes, I know of that letter.

YA: So, Romanov went to meet with Molotov, and he found there a chief of the KGB, Abakumov, who had papers accusing Keres of anti-Soviet activity. They had a long talk — Romanov defending Keres, and Abakumov from the KGB attacking Keres. Now, remember what happened with Keres in 1944: he happened to be in Sweden, and yet, he returned to Estonia, about two weeks before the Red Army arrived there. And because of this, Molotov asked — it was his last question of the conversation — if Keres had not returned to the USSR, do you think he would have lived better than in our country? Neither Romanov, nor the KGB man, could make an answer. And so Molotov said, “I have decided we will give Keres the chance to play in tournaments.” This was told to me by Nikolai Romanov himself.

TK: Very interesting. And this and other such incidents will be recounted in your memoirs?

YA: Yes, of course.

The second and final part of the interview with Yuri Averbakh will appear July 17. Averbakh talks about the current status of the World Championship, Botvinnik, Fischer and much more.



[\[The Chess Cafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Reviews\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Studies\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About The Chess Cafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2002 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.