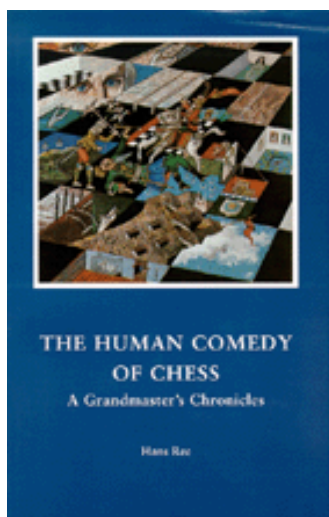




## COLUMNISTS

*Dutch Treat*

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy  
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

## Forgotten Master

During the tournament in Semmering-Baden in 1937, which had Keres, Fine, Capablanca, Reshevsky and Flohr among its participants, the Latvian player Vladimir Petrov wrote a letter to his wife in which he begged her to join him. Because of her absence he had already lost two points, which amounted to a loss of 2 x 30 lati (the monetary unit of Latvia) in point money, which would have covered the cost of her trip from Riga to Austria (one way).

I may seem illogical of Petrov to ask his wife to spend money on travel which he had not earned but lost, but one can imagine a domestic pre-tournament quarrel: "Please, come with me!" said Vladimir. "But it's so expensive!" said his wife. Then during the tournament Vladimir proved in his letter that her absence was at least as expensive as a train ticket.

Later in the letter he asked her to borrow the money for the trip and then told her that he had lost 70 lati in the casino, maybe as another incitement to come and join him and have a firm hand on the communal purse.

From this letter we learn something about the point money for non-prize winners in an elite tournament in 1937 - a point would earn a ticket from Riga halfway to Vienna - and also about the relation between Petrov and his wife, which seems to have been rather good. Many a husband would hesitate to ask his wife to borrow money to join him and saying that he himself had squandered such money in the casino, almost in the same sentence.

The letter is quoted in a small book recently published by Caissa Editions, *Vladimirs Petrovs, A chessplayer's story from greatness to the Gulags*.

As can be seen, the author, Andris Fride, uses the Latvian form of Petrov's names, with an s at the end, insisting that this is the only proper form. He writes: "The name 'Petrov' is common in Russia and therefore, to use that only made it easier to hide his disappearance and non-person status. We also like his proper name in pride for his nationality and in defiance of the bestial Soviet system which took his life as part of its indifference to human suffering and common decency."

Petrov had a Russian father and his mother was of mixed Russian/Latvian descent. He was born in Riga in 1908, when the city was part of the Russian empire. I don't think that he himself would have found the Russian form 'Petrov' improper.

Fride is obviously a Latvian nationalist, who at the end of his book seems to express a regret that the Russians who settled in Latvia after World War II cannot be thrown out of the country because of modern conceptions of human rights. It must be said that the history of Latvia gives ample reason for nationalism.

Petrov's last appearance to defend the colors of an independent Latvia was at the Buenos Aires Olympiad in 1939. On first board he made the fine score of +8 =11 - 0 against opponents that included Alekhine, Keres and Capablanca. During the Olympiad war broke out in Europe. An adventurous return trip lasted five weeks, after which the team arrived safely in Latvia, where Petrov in an interview could supply the curious information that the spectators in Buenos Aires had been so enthusiastic that occasionally they had to be sprayed with fire hoses to calm down.

In 1940 the Soviet Union invaded the Baltic States. Petrov became a Soviet citizen, taking part in Russian tournaments. Apparently he had to endure the attacks that were commonly directed at people whose loyalty to the system was not 100 percent certain. Fride mentions accusations in the Latvian press that Petrov was self-centered, too big for his boots, that his success went to his head and his drinking was uncontrolled, that he played for money and didn't repay his debts and that he regretted the Soviets taking control of Latvia. Such accusations could be murderous at that time.

In 1941, while Petrov was playing in Russia, German troops entered Latvia, where his wife and daughter lived. Petrov wanted to return home, but he couldn't cross the German-Soviet front and had to stay in Russia. His last tournament was Sverdlovsk 1942. Then he was arrested and no information about his fate was provided.

After the war his wife travelled to the Siberian camps to find out what had happened to her husband and even settled in that region for ten years. But only in 1989, at the time of Gorbachev's perestroika, she was informed that Vladimir had died of lung inflammation and malnutrition in a camp in 1943. He had been arrested August 31, 1942, because he had expressed annoyance for the decreasing living standards in Latvia after the Soviet occupation. In 1989 Petrov was 'rehabilitated', the cynical term that was used for the victims of repression.

For almost half a century Petrov's name could not be mentioned in the Soviet chess press and this may be a reason that also in the West his name is half-forgotten. Apart from the Buenos Aires Olympiad he had his best result in 1937 in Kemer, a Latvian resort town near the Baltic coast. Petrov shared first place with Flohr and Reshevsky, ahead of Alekhine, Keres and Fine.

### ***Vladimir Petrov • Reuben Fine, Kemer 1937***

**1. e2•e4 Ng8•f6 2. e4•e5 Nf6•d5 3. d2•d4 d7•d6 4. c2•c4 Nd5•b6 5. f2•f4 d6xe5 6. f4xe5 Nb8•c6 7. Bc1•e3 Bc8•f5 8. Nb1•c3 e7•e6 9. Ng1•f3 Nc6•b4 10. Ra1•c1**

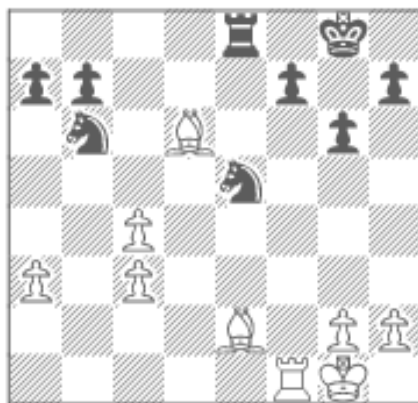
**c7•c5 11. Bf1•e2 Bf8•e7 12. 0•0 0•0 13. a2•a3 c5xd4 14. Nf3xd4 Nb4•c6 15. Nd4xf5 e6xf5 16. Rf1xf5 g7•g6 17. Rf5•f1** Now if Black would regain his pawn immediately by 17...Nxe5, White would have an excellent game with his two bishops.

**17..Be7•g5** So he wants to exchange a pair of bishops first.

**18. Be3•c5** But White won't let him and rather sacrifices the exchange.

**18..Rf8-e8** Black doesn't accept the sacrifice and indeed after 18...Bxc1 19. Qxc1 White would have good attacking chances against the king.

**19. Qd1xd8 Ra8xd8 20. Rc1•d1 Rd8•d2 21. Rd1xd2 Bg5xd2 22. Bc5•d6 Bd2xc3 23. b2xc3 Nc6xe5**



A sharp endgame. White's bishops might become strong, but his pawns are weak.

**24. c4•c5 Nb6•d5 25. Rf1•c1 Re8•e6 26. Be2 •f1 a7•a6 27. Rc1•b1 b7•b5 28. c5xb6** A piece sacrifice that with correct play should have lead to a draw.

**28....Re6xd6 29. b6•b7 Ne5•c6 30. c3•c4** Once again he plays the sharpest move. 30. h8Q would have lead to a draw. Strangely Max Euwe, quoted by Andris Fride, called 30. c4 a

much stronger move than the drawing move 30. h8Q, while later he indicated a variation that would give Black a clear advantage. Logically between 'much better for White than a drawing move' and 'a clear advantage for Black' there should be a move by White that is criticized, but it is not to be found. Maybe it's there in Euwe's original analysis, which I haven't seen.

**30...Nd5•e3 31. Rb1•b6**



Threatening 32. Rxc6 or 32. b8Q, but Black can just defend himself.

**31...Rd6•d1** With the threat of mate.

**32. Kg1•f2 Rd1xf1+ 33. Kf2xe3 Nc6•b8 34. Rb6•d6 Rf1•e1+ 35. Ke3•d4** I think that after 35. Kf2 - an unpleasantly passive move that of course was never White's intention when he sacrificed his piece - it would still be a draw. But now Black could have gotten a clear advantage.

**35...Kg8•f8** A fatal mistake. Euwe indicated the right defense: 35...Kg7 36. c5 Re7 37. c6 Nxc6 38. Rxc6 Rxb7 39. Rxa6 Rb2 with good winning chances for Black.

**36. Rd6•d8+ Re1•e8 37. Rd8•c8** Now Black is helpless.

**37...Kf8•e7 38. Kd4•d5 Re8•d8+ 39. Rc8xd8 Ke7xd8 40. Kd5•d6** Black resigned.

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