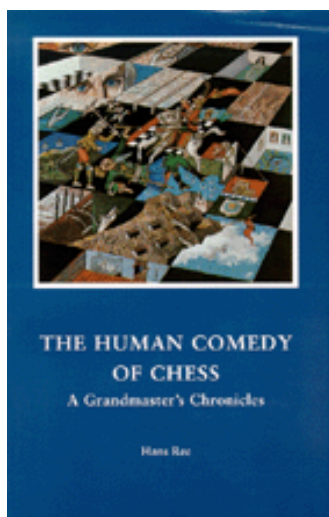




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Alex Wojtkiewicz (1963-2006)

“Now all these KGB pigs come to kiss my ass,” said Alex Wojtkiewicz laughingly at the opening party of the first Aeroflot tournament in Moscow in 2002. Indeed, a few moments later a Russian chessplayer who was generally supposed to have worked for the KGB, came over to have a most friendly chat with him. Life had changed since Soviet times and Alex was enjoying it. At the party he talked about a prison term he had served, the details of which I only learned recently, after his death.

Wojtkiewicz was born in Riga in 1963. His father was (ethnically) Polish, his mother Russian. He was a promising young player and Alexander Shabalov was recently quoted in *The New York Times* saying that he may have been the best of a group that included Ehlvest, Salov and Andrei Sokolov. These three players were to gain greater successes than Wojtkiewicz, whose career was interrupted for six years during the 1980's.

My database gives none of his games in 1981; for 1982 there are only two games and then there is a gap of five years until he resumes chess activity in 1988.

For almost five years he was in hiding to escape military service in the Soviet army, “spending most of his time in the St. Petersburg underworld,” according to a memorial article on the USCF website. Such a life cannot be endured indefinitely. In 1986 he turned himself in and was sentenced to a two-year prison sentence, of which he served one and a half years. In 1987 he was released and the next year he was allowed to emigrate to Poland.

At the Aeroflot tournament in 2002 he was already representing the United States, as a few years earlier there had been a conflict with Polish chess officials. This was his first tournament in Russia after his emigration. He had played a few tournaments in Estonia in the 90's, but never in the heart of the former Soviet empire and like many other émigrés, he celebrated his return as a political victory.

When the tournament was finished he intended to go back to the U.S. by way of Amsterdam, so at Sheremetyevo Airport he joined the Dutch group that would take the same flight. It turned out he was worried. Apparently, as a result of something about which he wouldn't elaborate, half of his Russian visa had been torn out of his passport. Would they let him embark on our flight when his papers were not in order?

I tried to reassure him saying that probably they would like to get rid of a

troublemaker like him as soon as possible, but this couldn't ease his mind. His worries proved to be well-founded, for while we were passing on to the departure hall, Alex was stopped and left behind. We said goodbye and wished him good luck, with a tinge of guilt for leaving him there, but not enough to consider missing our flight in a futile attempt to assist him. "He drinks too much," said one member of our group, and this could not be denied. Though I didn't really fear for his well-being, it was a bit of a relief when a few weeks later I found that he was playing in an American tournament.

He was very active on the U.S. tournament circuit, winning the yearly Grand Prix six times in a row. When he died in a Baltimore hospital on July 14, apparently from internal bleeding caused by a perforated intestine, he was leading the rankings for the 2006 Grand Prix, followed by his friend Jaan Ehlovest. In his last five tournaments he had won a clear or shared first prize.

Winning the Grand Prix brings an additional \$4,000 to the prizes already won in the individual tournaments. This money is won by extremely hard work, as witness John Donaldson's tribute in the Mechanics Institute's *Chess Room Newsletter*:

"Life in the United States was a mixed bag for Wojt. No other player, save the late Igor Ivanov, played so often and traveled so frequently around the United States in search of Grand Prix points. This life without an anchor, traveling weeks on end, certainly took its toll on Alex as it did on Igor. One online writer suggested naming the USCF Grand Prix after Alex and Igor, and it seems like the perfect tribute to these iron men. Alex was always busy in the US whether it was playing or teaching. Wojt seemed to feel financially insecure and it is a pity he had no health insurance."

Naming the Grand Prix after these iron men, apart from being a perfect tribute, might also serve as a health warning, though Donaldson, who is far from a cynic, probably didn't intend it that way.

On the USCF website, Alex's girlfriend Amber Berglund was quoted as she compared him with Dionysus, the God of wine and rapture: "He was a ball of heavenly hell•fire. He burned bright and his light went out too soon." He was a wild guy, but a nice guy and from the tributes I read on the web it seems clear that he was loved and admired by many friends and pupils.

At a memorial service on July 17 one of these pupils, Kevin McPherson, recalled a compliment that he had received when he was showing some games of which he was really proud from the World Open. Wojtkiewicz had gone through them, laughingly dismissing many of his moves, but then he had paused after one move and said: "Kevin, I've been teaching you for four years, you've spent thousands on chess lessons and finally, you play a good move!"

Here is a game from the time that Wojtkiewicz was still playing for Poland.

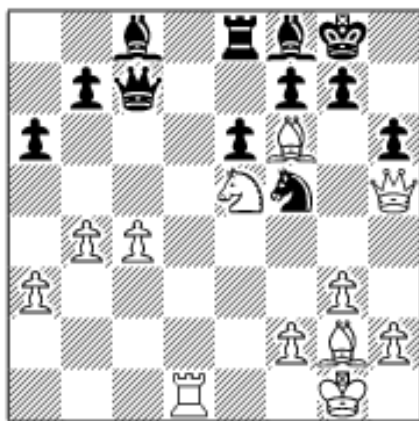
Alex Wojtkiewicz - Spyridon Skembris (Greece)
Novi Sad Olympiad 1990

1. Ng1•f3 d7•d5 2. c2•c4 e7•e6 3. g2•g3 Ng8•f6 4. Bf1•g2 c7•c5 5. 0•0 Nb8•c6 6. d2•d4 Bf8•e7 7. d4xc5 Be7xc5 8. a2•a3 0•0 9. b2•b4 Bc5•e7 10. Bc1•b2 a7•a6 11. Nb1•d2 Though White's set-up doesn't seem very threatening, in fact this is a difficult position for Black, who doesn't easily find good squares for his pieces.

11...Rf8•e8 12. Ra1•c1 Bc8•d7 13. Qd1•c2 Ra8•c8 14. Qc2•b1 h7•h6 15. Rf1•d1 Qd8•b6 16. e2•e4 Black's position is already becoming critical.

16...d5xe4 17. Nd2xe4 Nf6xe4 18. Qb1xe4 Rc8•d8 19. Qe4•g4 White's attack is quite dangerous. 19...f6 fails on 20. Rxd7 and after 19...g6 White would force a further weakening with 20. Qf4.

19...Be7•f8 20. Bb2•f6 Nc6•e7 21. Nf3•e5 Bd7•c8 22. Rd1xd8 Qb6xd8 23. Rc1•d1 Qd8•c7 24. Qg4•h5 Ne7•f5 Black's last chance to defend was 24...g6, though White's advantage would be big and obvious. But now there is a nice finish.



25. Rd1•d7 Bc8xd7 26. Qh5xf7+ Kg8•h8 27. Bg2•e4 Qc7•d6 28. Ne5xd7 Qd6•d1+ There was no defense. After 28...gxf6 White wins by 29. Qxe8 and after 28...Rc8, to save the rook, White gets a decisive mating attack with 29. Ne5.

29. Kg1•g2 Qd1•e2 Or 29...Nd6 30. Qg6 Nxe4 31. Qxe8 and White wins.

30. Bf6xg7+ Nf5xg7 After 30...Bxg7 31. Qxe8+ Kh7 32. Bxf5+ White wins the queen.

31. Qf7•g6 Ng7•f5 32. Be4xf5 e6xf5 33. Nd7•f6 Black resigned.

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