



Donner versus Troitsky

Why is David Bronstein's last book, which appeared soon after his death in December last year, called *Secrets Notes*? I see hardly any secrets in the descriptions of his travels through Europe since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when at last he was free to go wherever he wanted. Bronstein and his admirers have always been too eager to hang the clothes of a martyr on him, which doesn't mean that he didn't have a difficult life, and anyway, I am an admirer myself too. Who wouldn't be?

I was pleased to learn from the book that he had a special relation with Hein Donner, our Dutch 'Big Brother' as Genna Sosonko called him soon after he had arrived to the Netherlands.

Bronstein tells us that one day he was phoned by Botvinnik, then the president of the Soviet-Dutch Friendship Society, to inform him about an exchange program between Dutch and Soviet chessplayers. Donner and his family would stay for some time in Moscow at Bronstein's apartment, and in exchange Bronstein would stay with the Donners in Amsterdam later. It was at a time when any opportunity to travel abroad was eagerly taken up by Soviet chessplayers.

Bronstein's apartment was far too small to lodge the Donners. Why not let him stay at a more spacious place? Botvinnik explained that Donner had asked specifically to stay with Bronstein.

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



Hein Donner

Nothing came of it and Donner never visited the Soviet Union. I find it quite understandable that his choice to stay was with Bronstein, but on the other hand I wonder how the two would get on together. They both liked to explain the world to the unenlightened and listening to others was not their forte. Probably Donner would have bowed to the wisdom of Bronstein, as he was in great awe of the players of the Soviet Union, one reason why he never went there.

Much later Bronstein came to Amsterdam. Donner had died a few years earlier, but Bronstein met with his family. And he went to the Hein Donner bridge, which connects the Max Euwe square with a main traffic road. Whenever he was in Amsterdam in the next years he liked to stand at that bridge, relishing the homage from the city of Amsterdam to two Amsterdam chessplayers from the past.

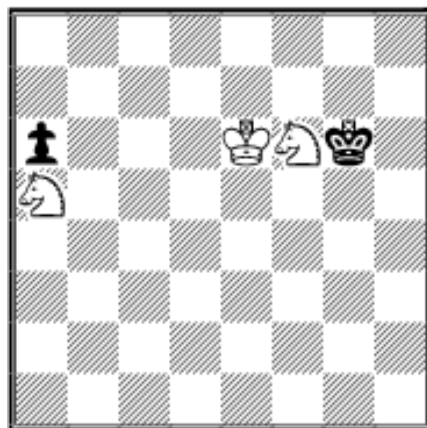
In his book he calls it the Jan Hein Donner bridge, which is not quite correct and would have been disapproved of by Donner himself. Donner claimed that this 'Jan Hein' instead of just 'Hein' had maliciously been brought into the world by the Dutch master Mühling, because of its resemblance to the Dutch expression 'Jan Hen' (John Hen) which stands for an unmanly man. I believed him, until Jan Timman once pointed out to me that in his early years of journalism Donner signed his articles 'Jan Hein Donner' himself. Bronstein and Donner had in common that their pontifications were not always in accordance with the plain facts, but if you allowed for this trifle, they told the truth.

In *Secret Notes* Bronstein is very disparaging about computer chess, though he liked to play against them when they were still beatable with mad gambits. Donner always took the stand that computers would never be able to play chess decently. When I told him in his nursing home, a few years before his death, that for the first time a computer had beaten an IM, he laughed at me, saying that everybody knew that computers couldn't play chess, except Hans Ree, who would fall for the most ridiculous stories. Of course he knew better.

Donner didn't live to see the rise of computer chess, but posthumously he was beaten by computer technology on his own turf, chess writing. Recently his Dutch book *De Koning* has been translated completely as *The King*, which Jeremy Silman has called in a review in *New in Chess* the best chess book ever written. Most of the articles collected in that book are humorous or polemical stories about the general world of chess, but there is also a big technical chapter about a subject with which Donner had been obsessed for many months: the endgame of two knights against a pawn.

Like most players I have never seen this intriguing endgame played in practice. Once I had the chance, but I missed it. It was during this year's Corus tournament in Wijk aan Zee.

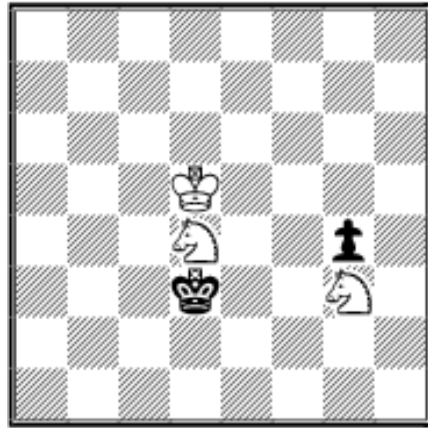
The first time control at the Corus tournament is at 5.30 pm and usually the press conference, given by the winner of a remarkable game, starts half an hour later. It takes about half an hour and then the journalists start working. Play goes on, but what happens during the final hours in the B-group and C-group is hardly noticed. And so it took a full week before I learned – thanks to the website www.chessvibes.com – that in the fourth round in the C-group there had been that rare delicacy, the endgame of two knights against a pawn. It had occurred in the game Brynell-Krasenkow, which had the following position after Black's 66th move.



As every Russian schoolboy knows, without the pawn this is a trivial draw, because two knights cannot force mate. When the defending side has a pawn, the endgame is won more often than not, but the winning process is quite difficult. Even with perfect play the win often takes more than 50 moves, which under present FIDE rules means that the game will end prematurely as a draw.

Brynell's position was theoretically winning and with perfect play he could have delivered mate within 50 moves, though the margin was small. Perfect play in this ending is unattainable for human beings. The game ended as a draw.

Difficult as it is to win a theoretically winning position with the two knights, defending a theoretically drawn position is very hard too. Even the great endgame virtuoso Anatoly Karpov failed the task.

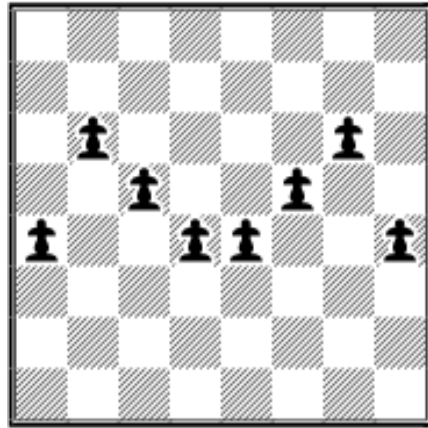


This is Topalov – Karpov, Amber rapid 2000, after White's 61st move.

Because Black's pawn is well advanced, the position is theoretically drawn, but Topalov won rather quickly. Naturally, to defend this endgame accurately at the end of a rapid game is beyond human powers. And one should realise that Karpov was raised as a chessplayer in times when games were adjourned after 40 moves. Practical players didn't study this complicated ending. If they would ever have it on the board, it would be long after adjournment and there would be time enough to look it up in a book.

The theory of this endgame has been worked out by the great Russian study composer Alexei Alexeievich Troitsky (1866-1942), who died during the siege of Leningrad of exhaustion and malnutrition.

He didn't limit himself to the analysis of special cases of the endgame, but managed to find a general law, which is illustrated by the following diagram.



Troitsky's Law says that when the defender's pawn has not advanced further than in this diagram, the position is winning for the side with the knights (in this case White). Of course the pawn has to be blocked by one of the knights, otherwise it will advance further, and blocking by the king is senseless. Winning positions where the pawn is further advanced do exist according to Troitzky, but they are exceptional.

The diagram and Troitsky's Law are an astounding achievement of the human mind. In our modern times it is hard to imagine that someone could attain this result without help of a computer.

Donner wrote that it was the result of almost a lifetime of study. Between 1906 and 1910 Troitsky had published a series of articles about the endgame K+ 2N's versus K+ P in the German magazine *Deutsche Schachblätter*. His final monograph about the endgame appeared in 1937 and according to Donner it has the defects of a work that has been amended and improved for 30 years: it had become incomprehensible to outsiders.



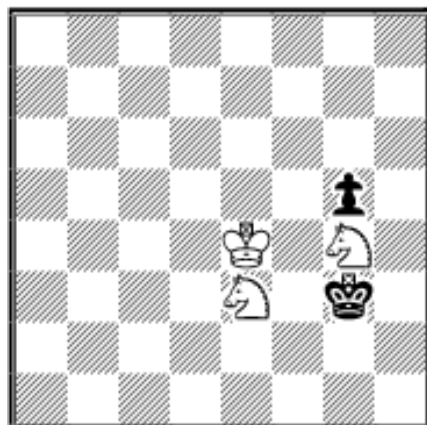
Alexei Alexeievich Troitsky

But Donner wanted to understand Troitsky. At the Amsterdam artist's club which had many chessplayers as members we used to meet to discuss the ways of the world or to play blitz. But there was a period of a few months, in 1976 or 1977, when Donner had only one subject: two knights against a pawn. He tried to convey to us the wonders of the manuscript of Chapais, the bizarre dance of the kings, Henry's sideways check and the retrograde of the second order. I was duly impressed, but I didn't understand much of it. It was usually past midnight when we met there, but at another hour I wouldn't have understood him either.

Donner published his findings in 1977 in a revision of the first tome of Max Euwe's series of books on the endgame. Most of the endings in that book were rather simple and there was not much for Donner to revise. But the chapter he wrote on the knights versus pawn ending were vintage Donner.

He didn't confine himself to an explication of Troitsky's analyses, but he tried to improve on them and wrote: "It is with some hesitation that we express the conjecture that the great man has erred here."

His difference of opinion with Troitsky was about the following position:



According to Troitsky this position is drawn, while Donner thought it was winning for white. Based on his analysis of this particular position he suggested, 'trembling because of our own temerity' that the diagram that represents Troitsky's Law should be amended: In that diagram Black's b- and g-pawns shouldn't be on b6 and g6, as Troitsky had it, but on b5 and g5.

A small amendment, but if Donner would have been right, his contribution would have been written with golden letters in the Book of Human Chess Achievements. But alas, he was mistaken.

Nowadays one can simply feed the position of the last diagram to the Nalimov Tablebase.

According to Troitsky it was a draw, according to Donner it was winning for White. The Nalimov oracle declares that it is a draw. Thereby Donner's proposed amendment of Troitsky's Law loses its foundation.

But one should admire the obsessive tenacity with which Donner immersed himself in this ending for many months. He dared to criticize Troitsky and he was wrong, but the number of people in the world who were able to give a well-founded opinion on this endgame could probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. And of course it is much more heroic to be wrong the way Donner was wrong, than to feed a position to the Nalimov oracle and be right.



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