



COLUMNISTS

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

Lev Alburt & Al
Lawrence



Picture Yourself in the U.S. Championship...

Playing openings you'd never used before!

OUR STORY THIS MONTH is classic *Hoist*, perhaps a unique occurrence in the annals of off-the-board oddities. It's the behind-the-scenes record of how the 1990 US Championship was won by a competitor who played moves he'd never tried out before, after only a few hours on-site with a friend who somehow talked him into this apparent madness!

Who were these men? Well, the competitor was *Hoist* co-author Lev Alburt, who, you may know, prefers to stick unflappably to his favorite openings. His friend was a fellow former Russian. Was he a reincarnation of Rasputin, hypnotizing Lev into such uncharacteristic experiments? No, but, although he didn't claim to be, he may well qualify as a true chess prophet.

The story holds an invaluable lesson or two, and gives us a chance to draw your attention to a new and, we feel, a very unusual book, co-written by the Svengali in question. He is GM Alex Chernin. He was born in Karkov, Ukraine, in 1960 and began playing chess in 1971, proving himself to be a prodigy. In 1977 he took second place in the Soviet Junior championship, right behind a promising youngster named Garry. Second place in the 1979 World Junior Championship followed, and then many successes as an adult, including the prestigious overall USSR Championship in 1980. In addition to his career as a player, he served as trainer for a number of the world's best—GMs Beliavsky, Gelfand, M. Gurevich, Lautier, and others. His work has rendered important new theory in the Slav, Semislab, Gurenfeld, Benoni, and of course, the Pirc Defense. Alex moved to Budapest in 1991 and lives there happily with his wife, young son and his doted-on family cat. Alex speaks fluent English, and is an extraordinarily thoughtful person, who gives you straight answers in a soft-spoken voice. He's quick with an engaging,



empathetic smile and a ready sense of humor. (Photo: *Not "just" a theoretician - Chernin is a world-championship candidate and one of the leading practitioners of the Pirc.*)

Let's take a look first at the book, which really got its start during the strange circumstances of 1990.

Nothing held back

The public loves competitors who don't hold back, whatever the sport. If we're boxing fans, we love Felix Trinidad and Fernando Vargas throwing leather from all angles and dragging themselves up from each knockdown to belt the other guy again and smile. We root for the marathoner who breaks the tape mere inches ahead of his rival and falls head-first into his coach's arms. On the chessboard, we love a Marshall who pitches everything he has at the opposition, sometimes, magically, to have left only the two pieces executing mate.

On the other hand, we've come to expect that a world-class GM like Alex, at the top of his game, may write a very good book, but will keep secret TNs (theoretical novelties)—those game-winning aces of the opening—up their sleeves and off the pages. After all, they have sweaty-palm-equity in those unearthed treasures. And other GMs, perhaps preparing for a world championship match, hire such opening specialists for big fees, expecting to get moves not previously doled out to every amateur with a copy of the right paperback. (Photo: *The gracious "prophet" of opening theory - Alex Chernin during a visit to the Lawrence's.*)



A tell-all opening book

But now along comes a book—*Pirc Alert!*—by world championship-candidate and leading Pirc theoretician Chernin. This one breaks the rules—it holds nothing back. (It's a volume your co-authors know well because we worked with Alex on preparing it. The theory within the book is overwhelmingly Chernin's, however, from his own notebooks.) He shares every tasty new creation from his home cooking. And he's whipped up plenty during 20 years of playing the dynamic Pirc against the world's best.

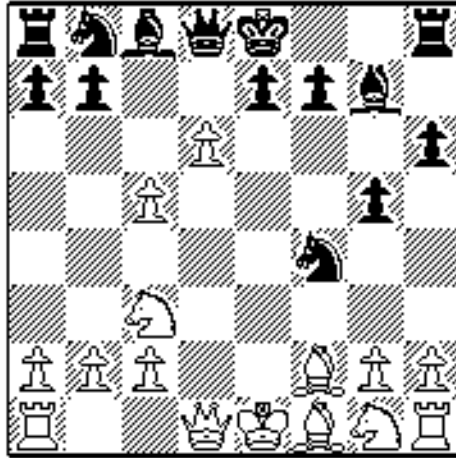
TNs from the starting gun

Alex is certainly an idea-man. You might think everything within the first few moves in a popular opening has been, like the Florida ballots, counted and re-counted by machines—and even held up to the light to reveal any holes. Alex finds brand-new ideas, amazingly enough, in territory you'd think would have been thoroughly mapped. Selecting almost randomly from the many TNs in the new book, let's look at two examples of Chernin's discoveries in what

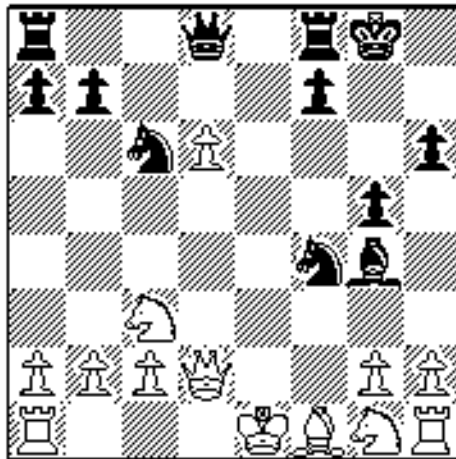
should be the very well charted waters of the first dozen moves.

In this first example, he finds a TN for White—and tells us how to avoid it as Black! Now that's putting it all out there!

1. e4 d6 2. d4 Nf6 3. Nc3 g6 4. Bg5 Bg7 5. f4 h6 6. Bh4 c5 7. e5 Nh5 8 dxc5 Nxf4 9. exd6 g5 10. Bf2 (*See Diagram*)



In this wild position, 10...0-0 is generally considered by theory to be okay. However, Alex found that after Black castles, White has the strong TN **11. Bd4**, e.g.—**11...Bxd4 12. Qxd4 Nc6 13. Qd2 exd6 14. cxd6 Bg4** (*See Diagram*).

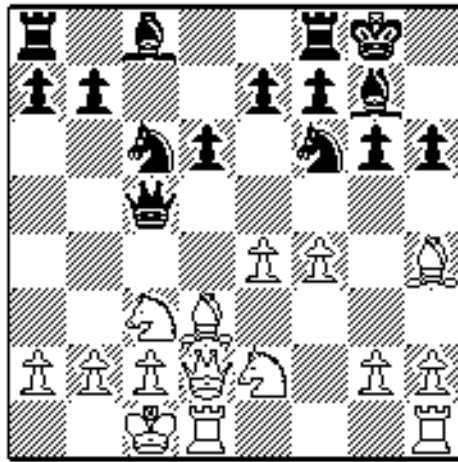


Now 15. Nge2 and 0-0-0 is dangerous for Black.

But by playing 10...Nc6, Black precludes this variation. An important nuance to be overlooked by hundreds of GMs scrutinizing the first 10 moves over and over and over and over ...

Here's a Chernin TN for Black. The Pirc offers great flexibility, often allowing a defender to

choose from several kinds of middlegame plans, as in the following position, which arose in the 1996 US Championship game between GMs Alexander Yermolinsky and Boris Gulko. (*See Diagram*)



Here Gulko played **11...Nb4** and eventually lost. The move, Chernin points out, seems untimely because the exchange ... Nb4xd3 only strengthens White's game after cxd3. Alex explains that Black can play the more logical 11...a6 and 12...b5 or 11...Be6, with double-edged play. Both sides seek to organize an attack against the opponent's King.

However, if he wants to accelerate his attack, Black can use another of Alex's of TNs, the pawn sacrifice 11...b5, which appears very promising. You really couldn't blame Chernin if he had saved this one for his own game with the "Yerminator," but Alex has pledged to tell all in *Pirc Alert!*.

Chernin, Albur, and the 1990 US Championship

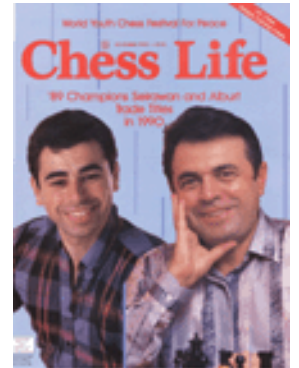
The story of Albur's discovery of Chernin's singular genius for teaching opening ideas in a very short period of time—as well as his talent for finding overlooked opening fireworks—began in the strange circumstances we mentioned at the top of this column. The story may seem almost like fiction, but it is true. It may seem at first that it's about Lev Albur, since it's a personal experience narrative. (Actually, both your co-authors were present during these events, Albur as a participant in the US Championship and Lawrence, then Executive Director of the US Chess Federation and advocate of the tournament's new format.) But the story is really about Alex and his truly amazing teaching abilities—and how he can in a very short period of time impart both specific and general opening knowledge on a very high level to both masters and non-masters.

August of 1990 found Lev in Jacksonville, Florida, hoping to win his third US invitational Championship in seven years. The competition, as well as the format, was brutal. Sixteen of America's toughest GMs—including Joel Benjamin, six-time champ Walter Browne, Larry Christiansen, Nick deFirmian, Max Dlugy, Roman Dzindzichashvili, Boris Gulko and Yasser Seirawan—all nurtured their own hopes.

The tournament was the first-ever knockout championship (structured similarly to a tennis tournament). It was held concurrently with the US Open—a Swiss tournament contested by hundreds of players of all strengths. The US invitational hopefuls faced each other in matches of two games, each at a time control of

40 moves in two hours, with sudden-death game tiebreakers. Losers were out but could enter the US Open. (Alburt had won the US Open in 1987 and again in 1989, but this year he hoped not to have a chance!) The last two left "standing" in the championship would play a match of four games.

Alburt's first match against 1989 co-champion Yasser Seirawan went better than Lev could have hoped. He won both games, and so advanced. (Yaz went on to win the US Open; in effect, when the clocks stopped ticking, the two had castled from their 1989 positions. See photo.) In the second match, Lev's toughest, he squeaked by Maxim Dlugy in a tiebreak blitz game. Max had just been elected president of the United States Chess Federation, and the USCF annual convention is always held at the US Open. So the organizational demands on Max were extremely distracting. Alburt still had to get by deFirmian and then the winner of the Dzindzi-Christiansen match-up. The US Championship is not easy to win! (Photo: *Chess Life* cover- GMs Yasser Seirawan (left) and Lev Alburt on the cover of the 1990 November *Chess Life* magazine. They had "castled" titles from 1989.)



It's only the US Championship—play a variation you've never tried before!

Enter Alex Chernin, who was doing quite well in the US Open. Alburt knew Alex's reputation as a brilliant opening theoretician and as a top-echelon GM. They had been good friends for years. Like Chernin, Lev is originally from Ukraine. In talking shop at the hosting hotel, Alex gave Alburt some advice about playing Nick. He said that deFirmian, like Lev himself, nearly always plays the same variations. Since Nick had Black the first game, and played 1. d4, he would undoubtedly play the Modern Benoni and count on Lev's religious response, the g3 system. Alex recommended surprising Nick by putting White's light-square bishop on d3.

Lev was skeptical. He'd always stuck to playing the opening variations he thought were best or at least best for him. Really, Alburt was one of the last players who would be comfortable with trying suddenly to learn a new variation for a championship contest. It was a waste of time even to consider, Lev thought. But Alex pestered and ultimately prevailed. Lev agreed to give his friend just fifteen minutes.

Alex's explanations were so concise, his logic and focus so clear, and his ideas so strong that, in spite of himself, Lev had to admit

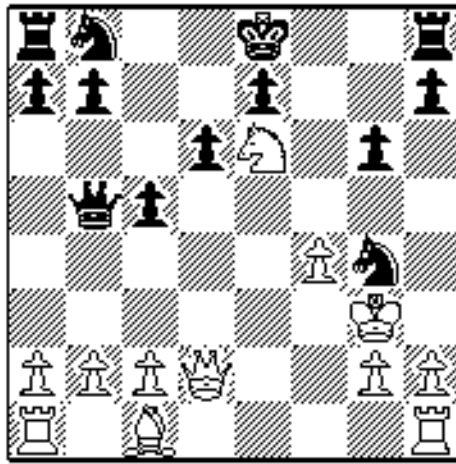
he was very interested. The two wound up spending about two hours on a system Lev had never in his life played, and he had to admit he felt well prepared! In fact, Lev went on to achieve an overwhelming game in his first match-up against de Firmian--without making a single move on his own. Give him such a position against anyone and he had better win! He did. (Later, *Chess Informant 51* even awarded his opening sequence in this game the "Best Theoretical Novelty," which was accompanied by a cash prize. There had been stiff competition—brilliant games by both Kasparov and Karpov, for example.)

That worked. Now use an entire opening you've never played before!

Alex, now acting as Lev's part-time second, was relentless regarding game two against deFirmian. Why should Lev play his predictable Alekhine, he reasoned, wandering into whatever Nick is cooking up? So now Lev was to ride into battle under the banner of a complex opening, the Pirc, that he'd never played in his life.

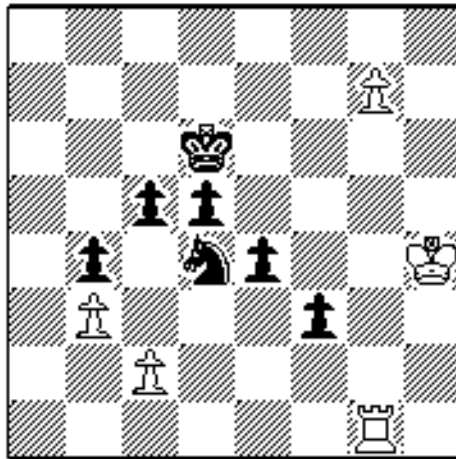
They expected Nick to follow his routine of responding to the Pirc with the Austrian Attack. Chernin had enough ammo to load Lev for bear in this variation. After the success of the first game, Lev was very understandably inclined to listen to Alex, who didn't have to plead for 15 minutes this time. He showed Lev the ideas and basic moves of the variations they wanted in the Austrian. He thoroughly convinced Alburt of the correctness of the ideas. Then he showed Lev other White lines—in case Nick would deviate from the usual paths. Very importantly, as it turned out, Alex showed Alburt a move for Black, an interesting sacrificial idea—giving up the Exchange for a pawn—in one of the main lines. (Giving up the "Exchange"—with a capital—"E" means trading a rook for a minor piece—a bishop or knight.)

Nick played exactly as Alex said he would. Lev got a good game, but then Nick outplayed him a bit. After 16 moves, Alburt was on move in the following double-edged position. de Firmian-Alburt US Championship Jacksonville, 1990 (*See Diagram*)



The game continued **16...Qd7**
17. Re1 Nh6 **18. b3! Nc6** **19.**
Bb2 Nf5+ **20. Kf2 Nfd4** **21.**
Kg1! Nxe6! (the
Exchange-sacrifice idea Alex
had drawn to Lev's attention
during their brief training
session) **22. Bxh8**. Black
castled long, and White had the
smallest of advantages. Lev
was confident that he could
hold the game. In fact, although
Nick played very creatively in

trying to win and therefore pull even in the match, Lev, on his 52nd
move, was able to reach this intriguing formation. (*See Diagram*)

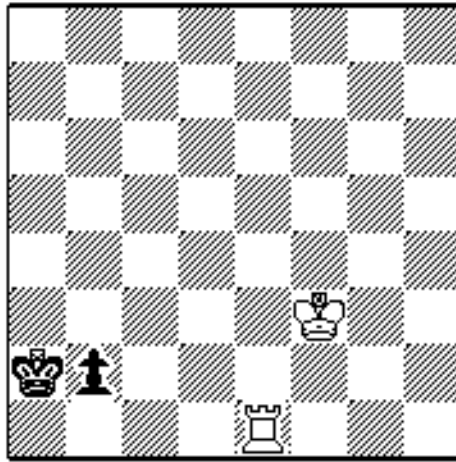


Here Lev forced a draw by
giving up his last piece and
following up by abandoning all
save one of the *rest* of his men!
This seems like a bit of GM
magic, and it is, but there's an
idea we can all understand at its
heart.

**Take a page from the
business self-help texts, try
"success-imaging" in chess**

We've all heard plenty about

imaging your success in an upcoming meeting or project, creating
a kind of mental holograph that we take with us. Well, the idea is
nothing new in chess. As the great World Champion Jose
Capablanca, the first inductee into the new World Chess Hall of
Fame in Miami, encouraged us to do in an endgame, let's look
ahead to imagine our "ideal" position. Then the path to this
rainbow's end may seem quite clear. Lev's idea is to get a position
like this (*See Diagram*):



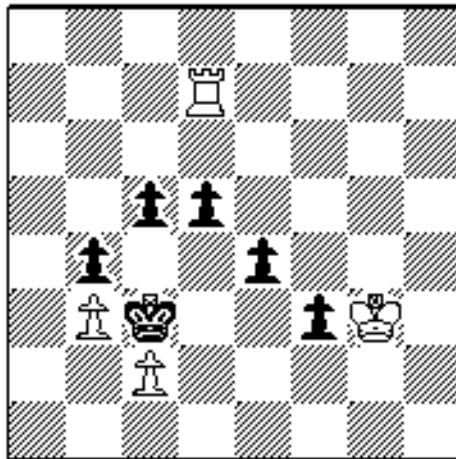
In your own analysis, try to stop him and see if you can get an outcome any better than deFirmian's!

Back to the previous diagram...

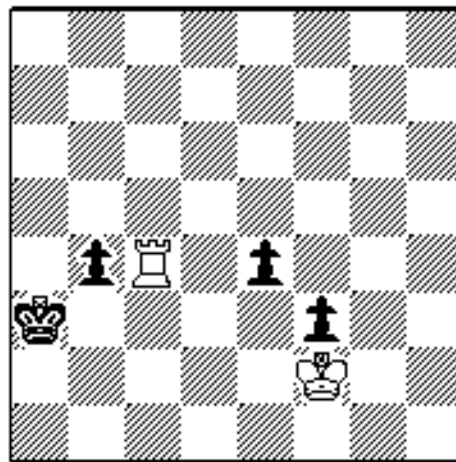
52...Nf5+ 53. Kh3 Nxc7 54. Rxg7 Ke5 55. Kg3 Kd4 56. Rd7 Kc3

Black begins to give away pawns while clearing the path for the one that will die

royalty—the b-pawn! (*See Diagram*)



57. Rxd5 Kxc2 58. Rxc5+ Kxb3 59. Kf2 Ka4 60. Rc4 Ka3 (*See Diagram*)



61. Rxe4 b3 62. Re1 b2 63. Kxf3 Ka2 64. Ke2 b1=Q 65. Rxb1 Kxb1

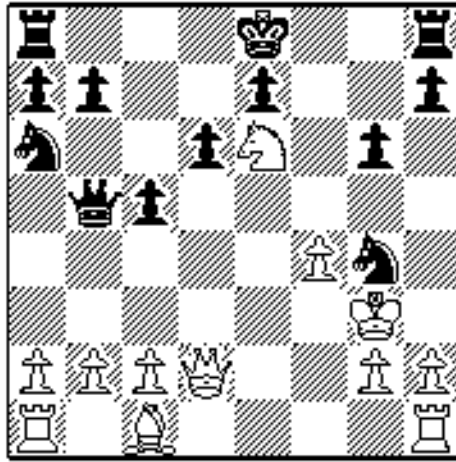
The pot of gold.

Well, even Nick had to call it even at this point. The first real chess mentor of *Hoist* co-author Al Lawrence was the colorful, no-holds-barred attacker and local champion "Mad" Jack Winters of Kansas City, Missouri. As Jack

remarked after one of his very promising Evans Gambits reduced itself to such a position, "It's hard to combine with the lone king."

The student changes theory after his first game in the Pirc.

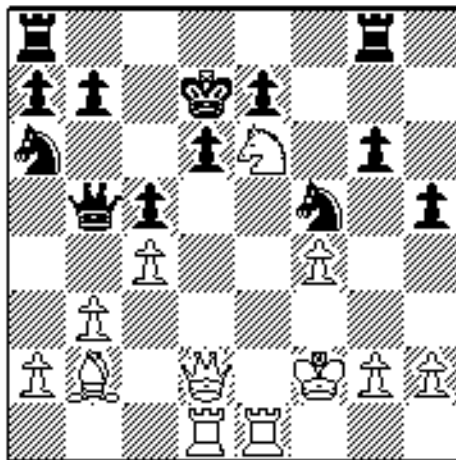
Can a student come up with TNs of his own? Of course he can—especially when Chernin is the trainer, and he emphasizes ideas. Let's go back to Black's 16th move of the de Firmian-Alburt game, just before 16...Qd7. Look at the possibility Lev showed Alex, **16...Na6!!** (*See Diagram*)



This move changed the theoretical assessment of the position! The tactical basis is 17. Kxg4 Qd7 (pinning White's "extra" knight to his exposed king) 18. Re1 Nc7 19. Qe2 Kf7 20. f5 gxf5+ 21. Kxf5 Rag8, followed by ...Rg6-+.

Five years later (you can see how practitioners normally horde their secrets!), Alex had a chance to test Lev's idea—on

de Firmian himself! Nick chose not to expose his king to the deadly pin on the c8-h3 diagonal. The game went **17. Re1 Nh6** (what would Siegbert "knights-on-the-rim-are-grim" Tarrasch have said about the position of Black's knight?!; if 17...h5, 18. f5!±) **18. b3 Nf5+ 19. Kf2 h5 20. Bb2** (20. Ng7+ Nxc7 21. Qxd6 0-0 -+) **20...Rg8 21. Rad1 Kd7 22. c4** (*See Diagram*)



Here Alex agreed to a draw—too early. With 22...Qc6, he could consolidate. If 23. Qa5 Rae8 24. b4 cxb4 25. c5, then 25...Nh4, with its deadly threat to g2, wins immediately. Otherwise, Black is simply better because of his healthy extra pawn.

Worth his weight in rating points

So Lev won the match with deFirmian all the while playing opening moves new to Alburt, after only a few hours of coaching from Alex. As a trainer, Chernin is obviously worth his weight in rating points. Next came the four-game head-to-head with Christiansen, who had reached the finals without losing a game! Larry was especially strong while on the attack, and very flexible, varying his openings. With some help from Alex, Alburt won a wild first game as Black in his own Alekhine's Defense. In the second game, Lev played his trusty

Catalan and won after many ups and downs.

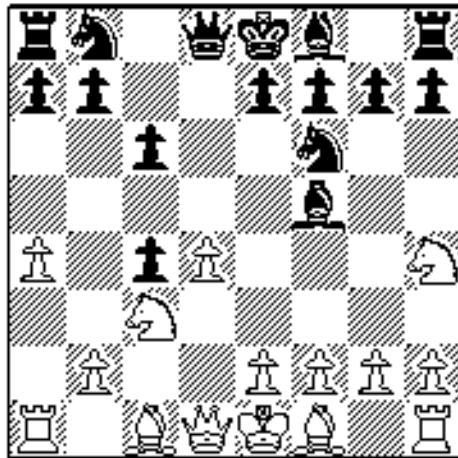
Learning to fish, and catching the sharks!

So one more half-point would earn Lev Albut the championship. Albut and Chernin expected Larry this time to start with 1. d4, which Lev intended to counter with his usual Benko Gambit. By now you can guess—Alex had another idea. You need only a draw, he told Lev, so why give away a pawn on move three? Now it took Alex very little time to convince Lev. In a few hours, Alex took him through the Slav, showing what to do in all the main lines. Once again, despite the short time, the brilliance of Chernin's own understanding and his clear, concise, reassuring way of explaining moves and ideas gave Lev both knowledge and confidence. Sure enough, Larry played a sideline. Here's how it went:

Christiansen—Albut Jacksonville, 1990

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 d5 3. c4 c6 4. Nc3 dxc4 5. a4 Bf5

Here's where Christiansen varied from the main line with **6 Nh4?!**. Normal would be 6. e3 or 6. Ne5 (*See Diagram*).



Alex and Lev hadn't discussed this move specifically. Not every move can be anticipated in training, and even if it could, who can remember so much? Lev was playing an opening that he had never before ventured. So Larry made a practical, professional decision. He wanted to take Albut out of his "prep," leaving him cast away in uncharted, unfamiliar waters. Lev didn't, however,

feel at all confused or at sea, as he would if Alex had simply crammed his head with tricky lines. On the contrary, Alex had explained the important ideas of the opening to him so well, that in reaction to Larry's unusual approach, Lev was actually able to create what is now the approved theoretical prescription for dealing with Larry's sideline! As the old saying goes, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and he can feed himself the rest of his life." After only a brief lesson by Alex, Lev was fishing—and catching the biggest sharks!

First Lev thought about retreating his attacked bishop to its home square. White could then return his knight to f3, when Albur could put his light-square bishop back on f5 again. But then White could make a different, better choice. Why give him that option? Wouldn't it be better to make him live with his knight-on-the-rim variation? There *must* be a good reason his sixth move is not a main line for White.

A typical reaction to 6. Nh4 would be 6...Bg6, in order after 7. Nxf6 to recapture toward the center and at the same time to open the h-file. But there's another "candidate move."

6...e6!

Alex had shown Lev this move in a similar position. Yes, it invites a doubled pawn, but look at some of what it accomplishes:

6...e6! guards the attacked bishop while forwarding development; It opens diagonals for Black's queen and dark-square bishop; If White captures, doubling the pawns, the Black pawn on f5 supports the e4-outpost for Black's knight, which can also be further supported by a rook on e8. Christiansen did capture the bishop.

7. Nxf5 exf5 8. e3

And on move eight, Lev played what happened to be a novelty (again based on Alex's ideas).

8...Bb4

Albur achieved comfortable equality and eventually won, capturing the title 3-0 in the final.

Moves that attract attention from the World Champion

Later, in a discussion with Garry Kasparov, the then-world-champion made it clear to Lev that this last game had been brought to his attention. Garry wanted to know who had told Lev about the improvement in the 6...e6! line, a novelty also discovered by his own analytical team. Lev couldn't blame Garry for being curious—after all, an important eighth-move TN doesn't come along everyday! Albur was amused to tell him that Lev found the move 6...e6! over the board in 10 minutes and its follow-up (8...Bb4) in another five minutes—after "studying" the opening for only a few hours the evening before the game. Of course, after having the pleasure of such a shocking deflation, Lev told him about Alex Chernin's special skills.

Chernin left an indelible impression on Lev of course. Albur had never seen such an ability to understand the fundamental, recurring ideas of an opening coupled with the ability to convey this

understanding in a fast, confidence-inspiring way.

Next month we'll show you what happened when Alburt invited Alex to New York to try out Chernin's approach on Lev's students—to find out if the trainer's methods would help non-championship contenders. You'll see that he fashioned for them an opening discovery that took five years for the rest of the world to figure out!

Reader Comments on "The Books that Came in from the Cold"

Last month, we told a story that included mention of Botvinnik's father, referring to him as a "doctor." A reader or two pointed out that Botvinnik, in his book "Achieving the Aim," had mentioned that his father was a "dental assistant." By the time of our story, Botvinnik's father was almost certainly a fully credentialed dentist. In the Soviet Union, a dentist would be called "doctor" in the same way that in the US both a chiropodist and cardiologist are called simply "doctors," rather than "foot-," "heart-" or "tooth-doctors."

We've had many encouraging comments from readers about the ground we've been covering. We read every comment and will make use of more of them in future columns. Please continue to send your reactions and suggestions to GMLevAlburt@aol.com

Pirc Alert!

Get a complete repertoire for the rest of your chess career, everything you need to know to defend against White's most popular first move—1. e4. World Championship Candidate and Pirc specialist GM Alex Chernin holds nothing back. *Pirc Alert!* is packed with surprise-weapons, never before revealed—theoretical novelties that can win you many games!

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"Chernin gives you theory as it *will* be in 10 years!"

—World Championship Candidate GM Alex Beliavsky

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