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Treachery in Zurich

Part 1

by Andy Soltis

David Bronstein is writing his memoirs, according to an excerpt printed in a recent issue of *64*, the last major survivor of the great Soviet-era chess magazines.

And if that extraordinary Cold War confessional is any indication, he has secrets to tell about the dark world of Soviet chess that you might expect in a spy novel:

Double crosses and pre-arranged games. A ciphered message from Moscow. Veiled threats and direct orders.

And a KGB officer bluntly telling Bronstein: "Do you seriously think that we came here to play chess?"

The excerpt - "from a future book of reminiscences" - begins by saying he will "at last tell the truth" about the 1953 Candidates Tournament, at Neuhausen-Zurich, Switzerland.

What many people recall about Bronstein and that event is:

- Bronstein, having won the previous Candidates Tournament at Budapest 1950 (after a playoff match), was considered one of the favorites to win.
- He ended up in a tie for second place, two points behind Vasily Smyslov.
- But he consoled himself by writing one of the greatest chess books about the tournament.

In the 64 article, Bronstein wrote that despite the fame the book, *Mezhdunarodny Turnir Grossmeisterov*, gave him, the Swiss tournament "sits like a splinter in my heart.

"Well, how long is it possible to suffer? So, I decided to pull this splinter out."

Bronstein said it was time to reveal how officials of the Soviet Sports Committee and the KGB orchestrated key games with the cooperation of him and other players.

The officials made clear to the Soviets at Neuhausen-Zurich that their overriding goal was to prevent Samuel Reshevsky from winning the right to challenge Mikhail Botvinnik.

In short, Bronstein rewrites the history of one of the most famous tournaments of the 20th century.

To set the stage:

Five players - Bronstein, Smyslov, Isaac Boleslavsky, Paul Keres and Miguel Najdorf - qualified as Candidates on the basis of their result at Budapest 1950.

Max Euwe and Samuel Reshevsky, who had qualified for Budapest 1950 but didn't play, were invited to the 1953 tournament by a decision of the 1950 FIDE Congress. (The Euwe invitation was controversial and only passed by a 13-7 vote.)

Four more players - all Soviets - qualified because of their top-four finish at the Stockholm 1952 Interzonal.

The fifth Interzonal qualifier was Yuri Averbakh who beat out three non-Soviet GMs, Laszlo Szabo, Svetozar Gligoric and Gideon Stahlberg, on tie breaks.

But this was only the second Candidates Tournament, and there was some feeling that it was unfair to advance a player from an Interzonal on the basis of such coefficients.

There must also have been concern that an event consisting of nine Soviets out of 12 players might look more like the "Second Absolute Championship of the U.S.S.R" than a Candidates Tournament.

So F.I.D.E. added Szabo, Gligoric and Stahlberg.

Even then, there were nine Soviets in the field of 15 when the Swiss marathon began August 28. With eight seconds and at least eight other officials and aides, including a cook, the U.S.S.R. delegation was an awesome force. (Compare that with the plight of the lone Reshevsky, who had no second.)

The major surprise in the first weeks of play was the poor start of Alexander Kotov, who had won the Stockholm Interzonal with a record score. But in Switzerland he lost his first three games and didn't reach 50 percent until the tournament's second month.

Instead it was Smyslov, with a 3-1 start, who took the lead. But Reshevsky pushed past him and led in Rounds 8-11.

This was partly due to byes. Because of the odd number of players, each player would have two byes during the 30 rounds, one in the first month, the other in the second.

Smyslov had the bye in the eighth round and he retook the lead when Reshevsky had his free day in the 12th round.

They were to meet for the first time in the next round. Bronstein has given various accounts of what happened before that historic game:

In his tournament book and again in *David Bronstein, Chess Improviser*, which appeared in Russian in 1976 and in English in 1983, he and his longtime collaborator Boris Veinstein describe Bronstein as being motivated by the realization of how important a win would be for his own chances, as well as for Smyslov's and Reshevsky's.

"I was behind Reshevsky by one and a half points and a win for me would reduce the difference to half a point," he wrote in the tournament book. "But should Reshevsky win and remain undefeated, he would catch up with Smyslov."

In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1995) Bronstein gives a different view, saying he was under pressure from "the heads of our delegation," who simply ordered him to win.

In *Bronstein on the King's Indian* (1999) he added: "Your every move was scrutinized not only by fans, but also by officials of every rank. Mistakes were not forgiven. On the result of one game could depend, to put it mildly, your entire well-being."

Now in 64 Bronstein fills in the blanks.

The leadership of the Soviet delegation was a "troika" consisting of Dmitry Postnikov, the deputy chairman of the Soviet Sports Committee, "his deputy" - a KGB officer named Moshintsev, and Grandmaster Igor Bondarevsky, who, Bronstein added, held a position in both "organs."

According to Bronstein, the troika repeatedly emphasized to the Soviet players that "no way, no how could Reshevsky be allowed to advance."

The night before the Reshevsky-Bronstein game, the troika "had decided that despite having the Black pieces I must win."

"An order!" he wrote. "There was nothing to do about it."

Under such pressure, Bronstein created a positional masterpiece.

Reshevsky-Bronstein, 13th round

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.g3 Bg7 4.Bg2 0-0 5.Nc3 d6 6.Nf3 Nbd7 7.0-0 e5 8.e4 Re8 9.h3 exd4 10.Nxd4 Nc5 11.Re1 a5 12.Qc2 c6 13.Be3 Nfd7 14.Rad1 a4 15.Nde2

Najdorf, a King's Indian connoisseur and frequent critic of Reshevsky, hated this move, which he said simply lost two tempi. In his own two-volume tournament book he recommended 15.f4, and if 15...Qa5, then 16.Bf2 as Stahlberg had played against him at Budapest 1950.

15...Qa5 16.Bf1 Ne5 17.Nd4 a3! 18.f4



Here Reshevsky offered a draw - "Are you playing for a win?" - because he wanted to provoke Black into making a rash decision later on, according to Bronstein.

18...Ned7 19.b3 Na6 20.Bf2 Ndc5! 21.Re3 Nb4 22.Qe2 Bd7 23.e5

White liquidates Black's only weakness and for this reason Najdorf gave this move a question mark. He noted that 23.g4 works because 23...Bxd4 24.Rxd4 Ne6 can be answered by 25.Rxd6 Nxf4 26.Qf3.

Bronstein, on the other hand, gave this bid for counterplay an exclamation point in *Improviser*.

23... dxe5 24.fxe5 Rad8

Bronstein recalled that despite his usual habit, "I didn't get up from the board during the five hours" - to show his dedication to the task before him.

25.g4 Ne6 26.Bh4 Nxd4 27.Rxd4 Qc5

Bronstein liked this move, with the intent of stopping a White knight from reaching f6 via e4. In fact, while there is no punctuation awarded to either player's moves in his tournament book - like most games in the book - he later gave exclamation points to Black's 27th, 28th and 29th moves and to White's 28th, 29th and 30th.

28.Rde4 Bh6 29.Kh1 Be6 30.g5 Bg7 31.Rf4 Bf5 32.Ne4! Bxe4+!

Both sides apparently evaluated 32...Qxe5 33.Nf6+ Bxf6 34.Rxe5 Rxe5 as OK for Black - but found that 33.Rxf5! and 34. Nf6+ is very strong for White.

33.Rfxe4 Na6! 34.e6! fxe6

Reshevsky again offered a draw, this time because he recognized

how badly he stood, according to Bronstein.

35.Rxe6 Rf8 36.Re7 Bd4 37.R3e6 Qf5 38.Re8

"In time pressure Reshevsky, according to his habit, wanted to confuse me but, as they say, the scythe found a rock," Bronstein wrote in *64*.

38...Nc5 39.Rxd8 Nxe6 40.Rxf8+ Kxf8 41.Bg3

"The adjourned game appeared only slightly better for me but I found a study-like road to victory."

41...Qxg5! 42.Qxe6 Qxg3 43.Qc8+ Ke7 44.Qg4

Not 44.Qxb7+ Kd8 45.Qa8+ Kc7 46.Qa5+ Bb6 and Black wins. In the final stage both players offer to trade queens. Here 44...Qxg4? would likely draw.

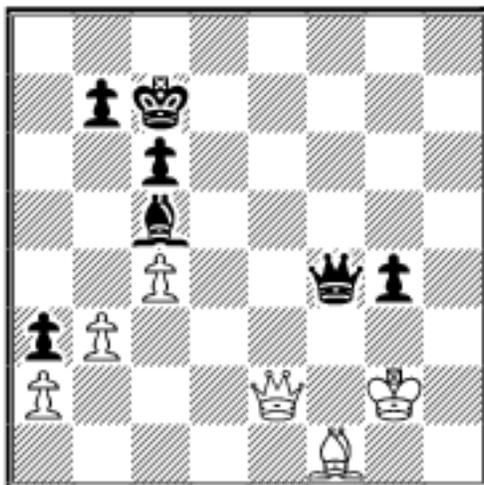
44...Qc3 45.Kg2 Qb2+ 46.Qe2+ Kd6 47.Kf3

And here 47.Qxb2? axb2 greatly improves Black's chances.

47...Bc5 48.Ke4 Qd4+ 49.Kf3 Qf6+ 50.Kg2 Kc7 51.Qf3 Qb2+ 52.Qe2 Qd4 53.Kf3 h5!

After ...g5-g4 White will be on the cusp of zugzwang.

54.Kg2 g5 55.Kg3 Qf4+ 56.Kg2 g4 57.hxg4 hxg4



White's bishop is being run out of moves while his queen must watch g1 and h2.

**58.Kh1 Kb6 59.Kg2 Kc7
60.Kh1 Bd6 61.Kg1 Kb6
62.Qg2 Bc5+ 63.Kh1 Qh6+!
64.Qh2 Qe3! 65.b4 Bd4**

"I felt relieved," Bronstein wrote in *64*.

He added that the victory meant he wouldn't be chewed out by the Sports Committee - "as I was in '52 when I lost to Byrne in the world team championship." (At the 1952 Olympiad in Helsinki, Bronstein lost a key game to Robert Byrne, with the White pieces, when he failed to exploit his compensation for a pawn sacrifice and lost in 42 moves. The Soviet Union went on to win the A finals but only by 1½ points.)

So far, just a case of zealous concern by the troika. But matters changed in the tournament's second month. At the half-way point, when everyone had had their first bye,

Smyslov held a one-point lead over Bronstein and Reshevsky. But in the second half the race tightened, with Keres joining the chase.

The Soviet delegation's doctor, V. Ridin, conducted physical exams and "reported to Postnikov that Keres and Bronstein were normal but Smyslov had weakened" and wouldn't make it to Round 30 in good playing condition, Bronstein wrote in 64. So, the troika "organized a cunning performance."

The key acts in the drama were Rounds 23 to 26, played October 10 to 14. The standings after Round 22 were:

Reshevsky and Smyslov, 13½ points
Bronstein, 12½
Keres, 12

A contemporary Soviet version of what happened next was given in the yearbook, *Shakhmaty za 1953*: "It could be said that the final victory of Smyslov was secured by four games: Keres-Smyslov, Smyslov-Reshevsky, Kotov-Reshevsky and Geller-Bronstein."

The first of these games to be played was Kotov's 67-move victory over Reshevsky in Round 23 - a serious, but far from fatal blow to the American's chances.

Smyslov had the bye that day so technically he and Reshevsky remained tied at 13½ points. Bronstein and Keres moved up to 13 points – and Keres was due to play White the next day against

Smyslov.

In the tournament book Bronstein wrote how Keres, trying to erase Smyslov's lead, was motivated by "psychological circumstances" when he "had the idea of taking his chances on a sharp and unusual Kingside attack using two Rooks and no pawns."

But according to Bronstein's 64 article there was a behind-the-scenes struggle well before Keres sat down to play 1.c4: The troika called Keres to the shore of Zurich's lake and tried for three hours to convince him to make a draw with White against Smyslov – so that Smyslov could use all his strength against Reshevsky in Round 25.

"Keres' second, Tolush, told me of this that very night," Bronstein wrote.

"Keres steadfastly withstood the onslaught" at the lake, he added, and may have eased the pressure on him by promising that he would consider what the troika said to him.

"But he came to the game in a fighting mood."

However, Keres was too upset by the situation and in no condition to play, he wrote.

Smyslov saw Keres' strange mood and quickly asked Bronstein why the Estonian was looking at him so sharply.

"Did I offend him?" he asked.

"I didn't know what to say and was silent," Bronstein wrote. "Could he not be in the know?"

"Keres, of course, lost."

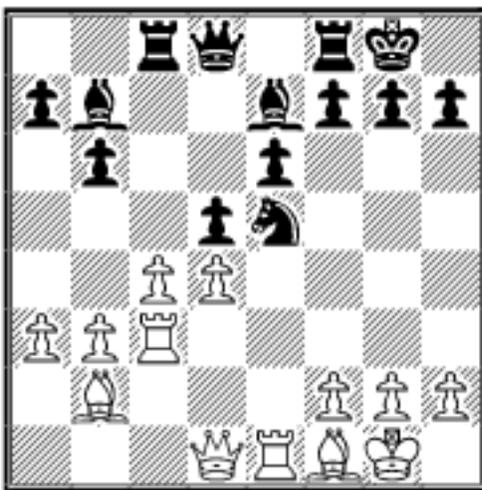
In fact, he lost a game that became instantly famous

Keres-Smyslov, 25th round

**1.c4 Nf6 2.Nc3 e6 3.Nf3 c5 4.e3 Be7 5.b3 0-0 6.Bb2 b6 7.d4 cxd4
8.exd4 d5 9.Bd3 Nc6 10.0-0 Bb7 11.Rc1 Rc8 12.Re1 Nb4 13.Bf1
Ne4!**

Black threatens to win the a-pawn after 14...Nxc3, and he welcomes 14.Nxe4 dxe4 15.Nd2 f5 16.f3 Bf6.

14.a3 Nxc3 15.Rxc3 Nc6 16.Ne5 Nxe5



Although the game has been repeatedly published as an example of Black's dominant defensive skill, it appears to be as much a matter of Keres' losing as of Smyslov's winning.

**17.Rxe5?! Bf6 18.Rh5 g6
19.Rch3**

Now 19...gxh5 20.Qxh5 Re8 is risky because of 21.a4, threatening Ba3 and Qxh7 mate, or 21.Qh6 dxc4 22.d5!.

19...dxc4! 20.Rxh7

White has no choice because Black's last move frees his b7-bishop to join in the defense (20.bxc4?? gxh5 21.Qxh5 Be4! and wins).

20...c3 21.Qc1 Qxd4



White could resign here. The remainder was: **22.Qh6 Rfd8 23.Bc1 Bg7 24.Qg5 Qf6 25.Qg4 c2! 26.Be2 Rd4 27.f4 Rd1+ 28.Bxd1 Qd4+!** White resigns

Then came Round 25, another key day since Smyslov, as White, beat Reshevsky in 56 moves. That meant he held a point and a half lead over the field with five rounds to go.

End Part 1



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