Features

Aug 19, 2016 | 18:15 by chess24 staff

Paul Keres: Prince without a Crown

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In 2016 the chess world lost Viktor Korchnoi, many people's choice as the strongest player never to become World Champion. Another contender for that title is Paul Keres (1916-1975), the great Estonian grandmaster, who would have turned 100 this year. To mark his centenary his compatriot Joosep Grents looks back on the life and career of the "Eternal Second", starting with Keres' early years until his explosion onto the international scene at the 1935 Olympiad.

ПОЧТА СССР 1991
15к
ПАУЛЬ КЕРЕС
Paul Keres

A stamp released in the USSR in 1991 to mark the 75th anniversary of the birth of Paul Keres | photo: Wikipedia

Paul Keres I: The Early Years (1916-36)

by Joosep Grents

To mark the Year of Paul Keres, in the following months I'm aiming to publish a series of articles shedding light on the events of his life. A lot has been written about a player who was prevented from playing a World Championship match against Alexander Alekhine by World War II, and who Chessmetrics report was ranked world no. 2 for 52 different months between 1943 and 1960. The material available in English, however, is limited. Most extensive biographies - and literature going beyond mere game collections - has been published in Estonian, and mostly by Keres' biographer Valter Heuer. This has not, to my knowledge, been translated into English. The motivation for these articles is therefore not only to celebrate the centenary of Keres' birth, but also to open up literature that may not be available to non-Estonian speakers.

Childhood wonders

I have to start the story of Paul Keres with an unlikely participant: a German zeppelin; for it was a zeppelin that bombed Pärnu and brought about the widespread panic that drove the Keres family to flee eastwards from their hometown. Paul Keres was thus born in the city of Narva - then part of the crumbling Russian Empire - in 1916, during the First World War. However, despite the attempt to flee from the war and bombs, the zeppelins and explosions would not leave the family behind. The Russians withdrew, but the collapse of the Russian Empire soon culminated in the Civil War and Estonia's War of Independence. The Keres family again found themselves in the middle of what they had tried to escape from, with frequent bombing recalled by Paul's elder brother Harald:

> We had to flee to our neighbour's basement to find shelter from the bombings, and suffer the blaring echoes of fighting on the streets. In the end, we had to flee the city. *(In 1919)* we arrived in Tallinn and stayed in a hotel there… we immediately caught scarlet fever… The hardships of our childhood did not leave our adult health untouched.

Amid all this violence, chess provided an escape from the horrific everyday realities. Paul's father Peeter Keres played chess as a pastime with his visitors and friends. Paul's first dabbling in chess is similar to that of the other great champions of the time.

> I was about 4-5 years old when I managed to break my hand while sledging and had to give up the usual childhood joys of winter. While I was forced to stay inside, I often observed my father's chess games with visitors, and that's how I first got acquainted with the game.

His father concurred, and added that Paul had not always been a respectful observer:

> During the war we stayed in Narva. While there, I often played with one of my Estonian friends from America. He was quite a good player. Paul was, as always, watching from the side, and at one point, when I was about to make a move, he grabbed my hand and exclaimed, "Father, don't make that move! Look, move the knight!" I suppose he was already right back then, but my friend got furious and snapped at me sharply to stop Paul from intervening.

The son recalled:

> It so happened that the outcome of my interference was rather sombre. Father's guest was furious about the interference and swiped the pieces from the board, while I was removed from the room for "unsportsmanlike conduct".

For those familiar with the biographies of his contemporaries - Capablanca, Reshevsky, Réti and others - the story of how Keres first got acquainted with chess should sound rather familiar. He was not, however, particularly interested in the game at first, until, as mentioned above, he broke his hand while sledging and was forced to stay inside for a long period of time. Add the long, dark northern winter to the mix and it hardly seems surprising that Keres found himself spending long hours on playing and studying chess - to such a degree that it soon became an obsession. As Heuer puts it:

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> Boys don't play games, they live their games, but the elation boys have is born in the morning only to die in the evening. However, this was not the case with Paul Keres: his first attachment was also his last, guiding him through childhood and later his whole life.

Paul's chess upbringing was marked by the times in which he grew up. His first opponents were his father and his elder brother Harald, with the latter always providing a sense of fraternal rivalry. Paul's tailor father encouraged such chess enthusiasm, but his mother grew increasingly wary of the game. To understand her scepticism, you have to remember that at the time chess was still largely considered a form of gambling in clubs, or an elite pastime, rather than a professional sport. This can be illustrated by *a rather well-trodden quote* regarding the earlier attitudes toward chess:

> A pernicious excitement to learn and play chess has spread all over the country, and numerous clubs for practicing this game have been formed in cities and villages. Why should we regret this? it may be asked. We answer, chess is a mere amusement of a very inferior character, which robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements, while it affords no benefit whatever to the body.
>
> Chess has acquired a high reputation as being a means to discipline the mind… [but] persons engaged in sedentary occupations should never practice this cheerless game; they require out-door exercises - not this sort of mental gladiatorship.

A young Paul Keres | photo: *Wikipedia*/the 1977 USSR edition of Heuer Valter's "Meie Keres"

Although a quote from the 19th century and the USA, such a mentality persisted into the next century in Europe, albeit at the time that concerns us things were beginning to change. Once Paul reached a level where his father and brother no longer provided competition for him, his mother stepped in and, in an attempt to protect the boy, she prohibited the whole family from playing the game and even went as far as to burn all the pieces they had in the house. Paul's mother also railed against other vices, such as smoking and alcohol, striving to keep Harald and Paul away from both.

Her restrictions put a small dent in Paul's potential progression towards becoming a serious chess player. Harald Keres theorised that, “It's possible that if a proper coach had found him at an early age he would have become a prodigy.” But let's set aside “what might have been”…

It was not until Paul moved back to Pärnu and started attending primary school that he caught the chess bug again - this time incurably. While in school he would spend almost every possible moment playing or studying chess. During one of the classes, the teacher noticed that while everyone else was paying attention, Keres was fiddling with his pocket chess set instead. The teacher was clearly irritated, commanded him to stand in the corner and threw his set into the trash. The class went on, and after a while the teacher discovered that Paul had dug the set out of the bin and continued fiddling with it in the corner.

Such a burning passion for the game demanded fuel, but both the amount of chess literature available - or rather the lack thereof - and his location on the map, threatened to extinguish that flame. Those unfavourable provincial circumstances had already led some potential chess talents to abandon their dreams for a more practical alternative, but although the environment plays a crucial role, a creative spirit can endure and overcome limitations. As Keres wrote of himself and his brother:

> Since it was problematic to increase our limited knowledge of chess, we attempted to compensate for that with eager work. There was little chess literature available, so I decided to copy every chess game I could get my hands on. In this way, I was able to accumulate a collection of about a thousand games. And, of course, not a single published chess problem or endgame could escape our attention, as we were unable to avoid participating in every possible competition to test our chess puzzle solving skills. However, our main training method remained games between ourselves.

Pärnu was indeed a provincial location, so living a life closely associated with chess proved very difficult. A case in point is the rather offbeat figure of Markus Villemson - relevant not only as an example, but also as a friend of Keres, who opened the door to a correspondence chess career. By the age of 25, Villemson had grown discontent with editing two chess columns in different newspapers and took on the daunting task of establishing his own periodical. Pärnu, backwater that it was, could provide no notable support. At one point he had to choose between three publishing options: to print in Germany, to print in a modern publishing house in Tallinn or to do everything himself. The latter, as the option which allowed him to keep costs to a minimum, was his choice. He even bought an old printing house and went through the trouble of studying the art of printing and everything related to it. All the work, from writing and printing to distribution, was done by one man or, if you will, by his alter ego: “Martin Villemson Chess Publishing”. After a couple of editions he reached 40 subscribers. Villemson was also a well-established and passionate international correspondence player, participating in the first International Correspondence Tournament of the ‘Deutsche Schachzeitung’, which is where his path crossed with that of Keres.

He became friends with the young Keres, who often helped with the analysis of correspondence games. Pugal, the third side of this enthusiastic correspondence triangle, wrote:

> Villemson loved ‘dubious moves’, as he put it, and often surprised us with them. We were all very happy once we were able to find some such fascinating ideas.

Villemson, Pugal and Keres formed a close-knit unit, and on one occasion Villemson was forced to stay in hospital for a while and suspend his correspondence games. Pugal recalls:

> *(Keres and I)* were both very sad, but we decided to be sly about it and send a letter to the editors in which we said that Villemson's hand had been injured and asked if he could use a hallmark instead of a signature in his letters. They allowed it, so for the next four months we played under Villemson's name. I provided the money for the stamps and Keres provided the ideas. This is how we got caught up in correspondence chess.

Villemson's chess periodical was still going strong in early 1933 and he dreamt of the one hundred subscribers who would allow him the financial freedom to upgrade the Gothic font to a Latin one, but it was not to be. In 1933, Villemson was driven to his grave by tuberculosis. Rumour has it that he caught the disease from a Hungarian correspondence partner, who in sending a letter containing his next move had included a move made by death himself - he would also die of tuberculosis shortly after sending the letter.

Heuer believes Villemson was Keres' first 'idol', since he made up for a relative lack of chess strength by being a selfless idealist whose quest for 'dubious moves' was highly reminiscent of Paul's own correspondence games. Keres was able to overcome a lack of local opposition largely thanks to Villemson's passion for correspondence chess - and the encouragement he gave. No wonder Keres soon discovered himself deeply entrenched in the correspondence world.

Taking part in correspondence tournaments became one of his obsessions and the amount of games he was engaged in grew rapidly over time, surpassing 150 simultaneous games in the mid-30s - a feat which even current digital correspondence players (or "button-pushers" if you prefer Nigel Short's phrase) would find challenging. However, from his activity on the correspondence scene a particular theme became apparent in the games of the early Keres.

Boris Gelfand pays a visit to Paul Keres in Tallinn during the Keres Memorial rapid tournament earlier this year | photo: Vladimir Barsky, *Russian Chess Federation*

'Crooked Openings'

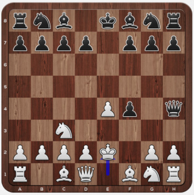
The focus Keres put on correspondence chess had a big impact on his openings. He would later explain:

> I used correspondence games, above all, for experimental purposes, often opting for very risky opening lines and attempting, at all cost, to create complicated positions which I could use to train my tactical skills... It is easy to notice a bias toward tactics in these games, while there are still considerable problems apparent in solving strictly technical problems.

While his brother believed the "crooked" (*kõverad* in Estonian - twisted or circuitous) openings were Paul's only chance to compete with better players, I second Heuer's belief that it would be wrong to claim that Paul's insistence on playing those openings was based on a lack of knowledge of modern and topical theoretical lines. On the contrary, he was well versed in many lines, since despite his earlier lack of access to chess literature his achievements on the local chess scene had opened up more up-to-date material. In a letter to Laurentius, Paul explained his insistence on playing dubious openings as a matter of principle:

> I don't shy away from book lines because of *(a lack of knowledge)*. I believe it represents an immense loss to a game when the most valuable part of it is played in a machine-like manner according to some book, without any brain activity whatsoever. My task is constantly to find new and previously untackled paths in the opening. To that end I am always willing to sacrifice one or two pawns for beautiful piece play.

While such a stance - seeking brilliance over best moves - is common to nearly all young chess players, it normally passes with time as players mature. They realise the inferiority of that type of play after being soundly beaten in numerous vain quests after brilliancy. However, as Paul's main method of play was correspondence chess, often with opponents significantly weaker than himself, he was unable to witness the inevitable defeat of speculative brilliance by pragmatic solidity. The wins Paul achieved only enforced his belief in such play, and sometimes reached ridiculous proportions in his opening play. A case in point is the Pärnu Gambit (also known as the Keres-Mason Gambit), characterised by the moves **1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Nc3 Qh4+ 4. Ke2?!**



That was was liable to get even the great Keres into trouble. For instance: *Keres 0-1 Menke*.

You can play through all the games mentioned in this article, with modern computer analysis, by clicking on a result below:

	White	Evaluation	Black
1	GM Keres, Paul	○ 0 - 1 ●	Menke, G.
2	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	Verbac
3	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	Faltweber
4	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	Laurentius
5	Schmidt, P.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Keres, Paul
6	Kappe, V	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Keres, Paul

« ‹ 1932-1936 *1936-1937* *1938-1940* … › »

Despite this game - sometimes described as the most humiliating defeat Keres suffered in his chess career - the opening featured as the subject of his first opening theory article, published in the Belgian 'Chess World' in 1933 (July-August). Although it makes a poor first impression, Keres devoted five long pages to theorising that White is better in every line.

Aside from this debacle, there were some notable examples of his stylistic approach when playing correspondence chess:

- *Keres 1-0 Verbak 1932*
- *Keres 1-0 Faltweber 1932*
- *Keres 1-0 Laurentius*

Due to such games, comparisons were often made to another Paul from the 19th century. On a more serious note, one has to recognise that opening theory was far from developed at the time - while many general principles had already taken root, the chess world was completely surprised by new approaches to the opening, for instance Réti's 'neo-romantic' 1. Nf3 in the early 1920s. The offbeat opening lines of the early Keres illustrate his creative instincts and the desire to sail in what were at the time completely uncharted waters, which ultimately led to new discoveries. The continuous quest for new and undiscovered lines developed his creative spirit and ultimately led Keres to identify and popularise opening ideas which have now become commonplace. To achieve that he first had to think outside the box, exploring the limits of the possible, but to avoid the dead-end of creativity for its own sake he had to find a way back into the box.

Getting back into the box

While his dedication to correspondence chess soon saw him develop considerable skill at the game, the first mention of Keres in a daily newspaper dates back to 1929, when he was reported to have won a blitz tournament with 8/8 at 13 years of age. At the same time he was invited onto a regional Pärnu team and started participating in matches. Keres really achieved prominence in the media, though, due to Vladas Mikenas, one of the strongest Estonian chess players of the time, who commented:

> I was visiting Pärnu and gave a simultaneous exhibition there. While walking around the boards my attention was increasingly grabbed by a dark-haired boy, who played very creatively for his age. I often had to stop at his board for a deeper think, but there was nothing to be done - after every move my position deteriorated and I soon found myself congratulating the boy while he received a standing ovation from the crowd. After the exhibition, the boy offered to play a couple of casual games. I could not refuse, for I liked the boy a great deal.

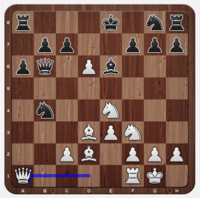
Keres not only won on his own board, but helped his friend Jüri Rebane, seated next to him, triumph over Mikenas as well. Mikenas was understandably impressed and was quoted as saying:

> I left Pärnu with a clear conviction that there was a new talent on the chess horizon.

It did not take long for Keres to conquer the Estonian chess scene. His main rivals began to fall like flies, until there were just a few left. The strongest of the remaining players was a player of Baltic-German origin - Paul Felix Schmidt. Schmidt was a seasoned player, but was not liked by the locals on account of the still fresh historical antagonism between the previous German land-owning nobles and their Estonian subjects.

During their first encounter in a tournament in 1933, the media was focused only on the mysterious 17-year-old from Pärnu, who, "doesn't know his opponents but will attempt to surprise them with 'crooked' openings." Keres was able to thrash the field, but adopted a risky line in *his game with Schmidt*, blundered, and was unable to recover. Despite this loss, he retained a half-point lead heading into the last round. A draw would have sufficed to win, "but Keres and playing for a draw are radically different things!" (Laurentius)

Instead, Veldemann observed that while Keres had managed to trick his other opponents in every possible way, his last-round opponent Kappe did not go along with such trickery (Keres played **1.d4 e5?!**) and was able to get a winning position in around a dozen moves. By move 16 this position was on the board:



Keres played on for another 18 moves, though he could have resigned much sooner - it was absurd to play on against such an advantage. Keres was also reported to have been very relaxed and chatty during the game. Such an attitude and play cost him the tournament, and Schmidt went on to win.

An opportunity to learn from his mistakes came in 1934, when he took part in the Estonian Championship. With one round to go, he found himself sharing the lead with Friedemann (Schmidt did not take part and Mikenas had emigrated to Lithuania in 1931), who was also his opponent in the final round. He was able to draw the game and force a play-off, in which he then recovered from a loss and played Black in the decisive game for the championship:

- *Friedemann - Keres 1935*

When some of his club-mates patted Friedemann on the back and reassured him he would win the next year, he snapped back at them: 'Not anymore!'

While Friedemann appeared beaten, the rivalry with Schmidt would be Keres' last obstacle in his quest for domestic domination. Schmidt could wait, though, for new doors had opened for the newly-anointed Estonian Chess Champion.

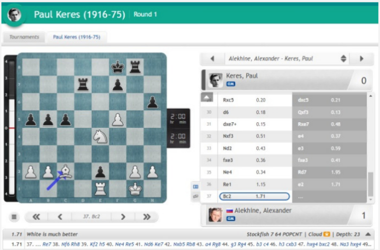
Warsaw Chess Olympiad

When the USA team of Fine, Marshall, Kupchik, Dake and Horowitz won the 1935 Olympiad in Warsaw it was their 3rd triumph in a row | photo: *Wikipedia*

Before Keres came along, the Estonian participation in the Olympiad had always followed a familiar pattern. An Estonian delegation had been registered to take part in the 1931 Prague Olympiad, but it never arrived in the city since the chess federation failed to raise the money to fund the trip. In 1933, the Estonian team was again registered, but warning signals emerged soon after: a team would only be sent if there were four volunteers to make the trip at their own expense. No such team was formed and participating in the Chess Olympiad remained a dream.

However, Keres' triumph resurrected the Estonian Olympiad dream, since his success attracted sponsors, and in 1935 the Estonian team set off for Poland. The Estonian delegation (Keres, Friedemann, Raud, Laurentius, Kibberman) had never before played on foreign soil and they were entering the unknown - as an unknown quantity. Unknown, that is, unless we include the enthusiastic correspondence players, who would search for Keres from the moment the Estonians entered the playing hall.

It's hard to imagine a more challenging start to an international career than what followed. After *beating Reilly (Ireland) in a mere 21 moves*, the youngster found himself sitting opposite none other than the great Alekhine himself - his second serious international game saw him paired against the reigning World Champion! It was no surprise, then, that fear took hold of him. Although Keres maintained equality out of the opening, he then *lost two minor pieces for a rook* and soon resigned.



	Rxc5	0.20	dxc5	0.21
30	d6	0.18	Qxf3	0.13
31	dxe7+	0.15	Rxe7	0.48
32	Nxf3	0.51	e4	0.37
33	Nd2	0.43	e3	0.59
34	fxe3	0.36	fxe3	0.41
35	Ne4	0.34	Rd7	1.95
36	Re1	1.15	e2	1.71
37	Bc2	1.71	...	

1.71 White is much better — Stockfish 7 64 POPCNT | Cloud | Depth: 23

1.71 37. ... Re7 38. Nf6 Rh8 39. Kf2 h5 40. Ne4 Re5 41. Nd6 Ke7 42. Nxb5 Rb8 43. a4 Rg8 44. g3 Rg4 45. b3 c4 46. h3 cxb3 47. hxg4 bxc2 48. Na3 hxg4 49...

Perhaps if it wasn't the World Champion sitting opposite (or he'd seen the Stockfish evaluation) Keres would have fought on...

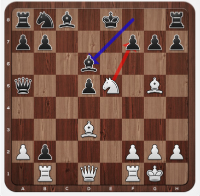
He commented:

> Against Alekhine I lost out of pure fear. This game showed that I still lacked the necessary maturity, adequate technique and tournament experience.

While Keres remained critical of his play at the Olympiad, others expressed surprise and lavished him with praise. Reuben Fine:

> At the Warsaw team tournament in 1935, the most surprising discovery was a gangling, shy, 19-year-old Estonian. Some had never heard of his country before, nobody had ever heard of Keres, but his play on top board was a wonder to behold. It was not merely because he performed creditably in his first serious encounters with the world's greatest; others have done that too. It was his originality, verve and brilliance which astounded and delighted the chess world.

Despite his losses to Alekhine and *Tartakower*, he earned high praise and recognition for his numerous memorable games, such as *this one against Grünfeld*, and especially *the iconic game against Winter*.



*Keres' move **13.Nxf7!!** wins in all variations - try them out for yourself here*

Keres finished the Olympiad with 12.5/19 (+10 =5 -4) and an individual 5th place on first board. Estonia placed 11th out of 20. The mysterious youngster, who had appeared from nowhere, received praise from numerous other sources, including Alekhine. Praise was not only verbal but came in the form of invitations to tournaments such as the prestigious Hastings Christmas tournament (unfortunately he fell ill and was unable to play). The Olympiad gave Keres great encouragement:

> The most important thing I realised from the Olympiad was that playing on a level footing with the world elite is a completely realistic goal. You just have to attain more experience and make a real effort to develop your chess, especially in terms of technique.

The end of domestic rivalry

Following the Olympiad Keres understandably intensified his chess activities. In addition to hundreds of correspondence games and participating in numerous correspondence tournaments, he also produced chess studies, took charge of a chess publication and found time to reignite his rivalry with Schmidt. The latter challenged him to a match after dominating the Estonian Championship with a 1.5 point advantage over the rest of the field.

KALEV
ASUTAT
190
PAUL
KERES
100

Anna Kantane and Padmini Rout play in the Keres Memorial earlier this year, with 100-year-old Keres looking on | photo: Marek Kolk, *malellit.ee*

Schmidt had not yet accepted that Keres was superior and, indeed, why should he? After all, the only two times they had played had ended badly for Keres. Schmidt was additionally motivated by the possibility of playing on first board in the upcoming Olympiad in Munich and therefore lobbied to play the match earlier in May as opposed to June. What about Keres' motivation?

In the run-up to the match, Keres easily won a training tournament in Tallinn with a score of 9/10, but it was noted that he was taking things much too easily. Laurentius commented:

> In his game against Pruun, Keres spent half his time playing bridge, after which he had to make 12 moves in 4 minutes! Such carelessness! In terms of the upcoming match, this should be cause for alarm for his patriotic supporters.

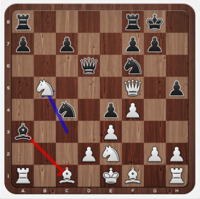
A contrast was made between the styles of the two players:

> Will the novelty-seeking, imaginative, risky and ambitious style of Keres be able to set enough traps or pose enough problems for Schmidt, or will he be contained from the very start and punished for every light-hearted move? Or will Keres turn out to be surprisingly pragmatic?

The stage was set, with Keres later recalling:

> This match turned out to be very close and was educational for me in many respects. After a relatively effortless victory in the first game, I was able to win a piece in the second with an easy tactic and, thinking the game to be over, I started to take things easy...

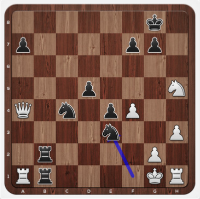
"Keres then got greedy and wanted to take another piece, but got a queen instead!" (Heuer)



Schmidt played **16...Bxc1!!**

Keres summed up:

> Schmidt… sacrificed his queen for sharp play and after several inaccuracies on my part was able to win the game.



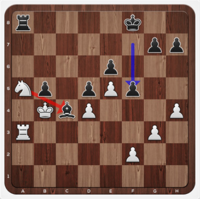
This is the final position of *that remarkable game*.

After a draw in the third game, Keres then *went for a weak opening in the fourth* and his *dubious play in the fifth game* earned him back-to-back defeats. With two games to play and the score at 1.5-3.5 the 7-game match seemed over. The match organiser was particularly distressed:

> It seems that Keres is done. His games are tactically inert, but this is not surprising if placed in the context of his wanderings off the board. Also, it appears to me that the heavy workload is finally taking its toll on Keres. To play more than 100 correspondence games simultaneously is simply too much. The presence of Villard is also disturbing, since he constantly drags Keres off to play bridge. This is not good. Keres needs fresh air and walks, not playing bridge. I don't believe in Keres anymore. I can see that he is tired. When I spoke to Keres and noted that to retain his title he has to win his two remaining games, he responded: "That is not difficult. In fact it is very easy."

Such frivolous self-confidence was typical of the early Keres and could easily have proven to be his downfall, but not on this occasion. Schmidt recalls:

> With the score at 3.5:1.5 I only needed half a point to win. Unfortunately, I fell ill and could not withstand five hours of play... I was still able to play well in the 6th game…



> …until I blundered a whole piece on the 37th move.

37...f5?? ran into **38.Nxc4** and, in an equal position, Schmidt's momentary lapse of concentration had resulted in an instant, demoralising loss.

In *the 7th game* Schmidt no longer put up opposition to Keres and, with the score at 3.5-3.5, Keres retained his throne.

In retrospect - that is, given the success that followed for Keres - it seems only natural to assume, correctly, that this was the last time his national title would be seriously under threat. However, after such an uneven match it seemed far from certain. To what degree was the triumph a result of Keres' brilliance and to what degree was it down to Schmidt's unfortunate blunder in the 7th game? Schmidt had achieved a satisfactory position in that game - a drawish position where only he could win. Schmidt:

> I do not wish to diminish the achievement of my opponent - for chess demands exactly such endurance - but I feel that I have to mention this *(illness)* to explain my poor play in the latter stages of the match.

Keres got the win through a combination of endurance and favourable circumstances, despite his own carelessness throughout. You can, to a large extent, say that he was lucky - that is, if you believe in luck in chess. Little did he know at the time, though, that the peak of his career would feature the reverse of all this - events taking place in unfavourable circumstances with no luck anywhere to be found. His carelessness is easily explained by the lack of external pressure and the frivolity of youth. He was still above all playing for himself and was fuelled by the youthful joy he got out of the game. His early playing years help explain why he was so inexperienced when it later came to playing in hostile conditions under the great mental stress of circumstances beyond the board.

About the author

Joosep Grents

Joosep is an Estonian chess enthusiast who learned chess at the age of five and began attending the Paul Keres Chess Club two years later. He recently graduated with a degree in History from Charles University in Prague, with his BA thesis set to be published by the university press later this year.

Comments 39

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Post

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historyinterest Nov 26, 2016 | 21:57

Hmmm... found an article by the Estonian Chess Federation "Estonian Championships medalists". Not only do they recognise Mikenas as Champion in 1930, they also recognise his 3rd place in 1945 and his 1-3= place in 1973. So presumably, he must have at least had some sort of honorary Estonian citizenship!? (In which case would he have been *forced* to leave Estonia!?)

But also, the article says he settled in Lithuania "in relation to the desire to participate in the chess Olympics in Prague in 1931". As we have seen, Estonia was unable to finance sending a team to this Olympiad. But Lithuania was able to. To me, this feels like a far more convincing reason as to why Mikenas went to Lithuania. Would this be worth looking at further?

0 reply report

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historyinterest Nov 22, 2016 | 19:56

Oops, the two matches *are* in 'Male Eestis' (pages 70 and 81). I overlooked them as the results are not given in bold, and as I cannot read Estonian did not examine the text closely. It would be interesting to know what it says about them and why they were not considered Championships at the time.

0 reply report

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historyinterest Nov 12, 2016 | 17:29

...

So I'm curious to know:

(1) Are these two matches currently definitely recognised as official Estonian Championships?

(2) If so, why aren't they recognised as such by 'Male Eestis'/the Estonian chess authorities of the time?

(3) Why aren't these two matches in 'Male Eestis'? (one would think they would at least be aware of the 1930 Mikenas-Turn match - but maybe not!)

(4) If they are currently recognised as official Estonian Championships, how is it that Mikenas is recognised as an Estonian Champion if he was never an Estonian citizen (if he wasn't)?

Would be interesting to know the answers!

0 reply report

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historyinterest Nov 12, 2016 | 17:15

...

will cost a bit in freight to get it to New Zealand. But may do so, anyway.

A bit off-topic this one, but an interesting curiosity!: Paul Rinne won the first Estonian Championship in 1922/3, Tallinn. 'Male Eestis' then gives the second Estonian Ch as being in 1932, Tallinn (won by Laurine). Then so on to the 8th in 1939, Tallinn. The next was held in April 1941 when Estonia had been annexed to the USSR, and is thus labelled "1st Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic Championship". The next three (1942, 1943, 1944) were held under German occupation are just called 'Estonian Championship' without any numbering. Then, Estonia being reoccupied by the USSR, the 1945 Championship is labelled "2nd Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic Championship". And so on up to Estonian independence in 1991. (Both the publishers and censors must have had some headaches!)

However Wikipedia [I cannot find any other online source for Estonian Championships; while Di Felice is confused and doesn't help] has them all renumbered in one numerical sequence, so I presume they were all relabelled after Estonian independence. However, there are also two extra ones there in Wikipedia - 2nd in 1925, Tallinn (winner Turn), and 3rd in 1930, Tallinn (winner Mikenas); with the previous 2nd of 1932, Tallinn (as given by 'Male Eestis') now given as the 4th.

Searching for these extra two Championships, I found the 'Neue Wiener Schachzeitung' of October 1925, Page 312 [available online] giving Turn beating Rinne +6-1=7 in a match for the Championship in 1925. And the Mikenas page of Chessgames.com mentions Mikenas beating Turn +5-2=1 in a match for Estonian Champion in September 1930. This seems to be confirmed by Mega Database 2016, which gives the venue as Tallinn. Neither of these two matches seems to be given in 'Male Eestis' (or in Di Felice)...

0 reply report

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historyinterest

Nov 12, 2016 | 15:37

@ Croissantist:

Thanks for reply. That newspaper article is a nice find. A rather unexpected reason as to why he left Estonia! Does this mean he was never an Estonian citizen? But then, in that case, how is it that he is Estonian Champion in 1930? [though see below]. At any rate, it did not take him long to represent his new home country as he was on First Board for Lithuania in the 1931 Prague Olympiad which began on 11th July 1931! He did fairly well there with +7-5=6, including a draw with Alekhine who was at the time at the peak of his career.

Re World War Two, Mikenas was taking part in the USSR Championship semi-final in Rostov-on-Don when Germany attacked the USSR in June 1941. Mikenas could not get back to Lithuania as the Germans had occupied it before he could do so. Therefore he was forced to spend the years of the German occupation in the Soviet controlled part of the USSR - it was not by choice. Therefore nothing can be read from this circumstance as to his attitude to the USSR, or the attitude of the USSR authorities towards him; or as to whether he was politically compromised or not. (And Petrovs was in exactly the same situation in this respect, yet he did become politically compromised.)

You make a good point when you say that Mikenas played in the 1941 and 1944 Georgian Championships. Indeed, additionally, I have found that he participated in the 1945 USSR Ch semi-final in Baku, and the 1946 USSR Ch semi-final in Tbilisi when it would seem he could have participated in other semi-finals closer to Lithuania. This would maybe indicate that he lived in this area during the war years and had made friends there. This could indicate that it was therefore just a coincidence that he was playing in the same tournament as the 'exiled' Keres.

Thanks for mentioning the Apollo bookshop (re Kivine book). I could not find it on Amazon, etc. Haven't decided whether to get it yet as it's in Estonian (which I cannot read) and ...

0 reply report

Croissantist

Oct 31, 2016 | 16:29

I found an interesting newspaper article about Mikenas ("Sirp ja Vasar" 10th April 1981), where his reasons for leaving Estonia are cleared up. First, yes, he was born 1910, his father was Lithuanian and mother was Polish. Apparently Mikenas did not know why or how exactly did he end up in Estonia, and knows little about his father, apart from the fact that he had been a revolutionary man and was shot for that in 1920.

Also, according to that article, he did not leave Estonia due to financial reasons or anything of the like. He had a Lithuanian passport and was forced to leave because he was summoned to Lithuanian military service (despite not knowing a word of Lithuanian). Even though he was subsequently relieved of military service - since he was the only one to take care of his mother - he stayed in Lithuania after that.

As to why he participated in the Georgian Championship in Tbilisi in 1946, it should not be very puzzling, for among other tournaments in the Soviet Union, he had already participated in the 4th and 5th Georgian Championships (off contest) in 1941 and 1944. So I doubt his participation had anything to do with "exiling". After all, he was not politically compromised as Petrovs and Keres had been, as when the Germans occupied the Baltics, Mikenas did not stay in Lithuania, but spent the years of the German occupation in the Soviet Union. So for him it was probably just a tournament like any other, apart from the added bonus of reuniting with his old "student" Keres again.

Paavo Kivine's book should still be availabe in local bookshops (Apollo still has it for example), however, I doubt it would be easy to get hold of it abroad...

0 reply report

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historyinterest

Oct 30, 2016 | 16:03

I managed to find some answers to my questions about Mikenas. According to what's on the Internet: Mikenas' father was Lithuanian and his mother Polish. In May 1931, he participated in the first Baltic countries Championship in Klaipeda, Lithuania and afterwards decided to stay "in the land of his forefathers" (June 1931). A big loss for Estonia, I'm sure. He was Keres' coach from 1955 to 1962.

Would still be interesting to know why he took part in the 1946 Georgian Championship in Tbilisi...

I found the item about the death of Friedemann in "Jarva Teataja" [Jarva Journal - apologies, I thought this was a person]. A date of death doesn't seem to be given there, but the Estonian Encyclopedia gives a date of 2 February 1944; I don't know where they sourced this.

The Paavo Kivine book you mentioned sounds interesting, but published just last year, it is already out of print!?

0 reply report

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historyinterest

Sep 7, 2016 | 10:15

Just hunted up a couple of books I'd forgotten having:

'Chess Personalia' by Jeremy Gaige gives Mikenas as born 17 April 1910, Tallinn.

Valter Heuer in 'Meie Keres', Page 75 (and quoted by Gaige) gives Friedemann's year of death as 1943. However, 'Meie Keres was published in 1977, so he may not have had full information at that stage.

👍 0 *reply* *report*

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tomiBravo Sep 6, 2016 | 21:08

Good Luck and Bad Luck come to all; the great turn events of bad luck into their favour and the "I could of been a contender,..." always find an excuse for not capitalising on their extra-ordinary good fortune, or good luck.

👍 0 *reply* *report*

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tomiBravo Sep 6, 2016 | 21:05

I really do not care about some statistical argument,... we should concentrate on his games and his analysis.

Statistics are poor substitutes for Performance, Creativity, and Brillance.

👍 0 *reply* *report*

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historyinterest Sep 6, 2016 | 17:46

...Keres war period, and that Keres nearly didn't shake hands with Botvinnik at the 1948 World Championship Tournament because of this. I imagine you will have been able to sort out these conflicting accounts.

I would say the other point in his career that Keres may have been best in the world would be 1937-38 (though Capablanca and Alekhine seem to have considered Botvinnik better). But Chessmetrics has him as low as 5th after AVRO 1938. [I am not sure of any other points that Keres can be considered best; he found good form in 1945-47, but Botvinnik must be considered better in that period; Smyslov was best 1953-7; Tal dominated 1958-60; and Petrosian was perhaps the best 1961-63.] The "Eternal Second" title for Keres was around well before Chessmetrics; it certainly is ironic that Chessmetrics does not have him as first, even for one month!! Yes, there is very little other historical rating sources available. Perhaps one day, there will be a monthly historical Elo series done - I'm sure that would give much better results.

Thanks for the correction on the deportation. Yes, what happened to the Baltic States during World War 2 was very ugly and unjustified. It is their misfortune to be in such an unfortunate geographical position.

Ah, so Keres was living in Parnu or Tartu when the Germans attacked the USSR. That would indeed partly answer my question, as I believe these were in the part of Estonia fairly quickly lost by the Soviets.

I look forward to the articles to come. Thank you.

👍 1 *reply* *report*

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historyinterest Sep 6, 2016 | 16:35

@ Croissantist