Sep 1, 2016 | 09:14 by *chess24 staff*

Paul Keres II: A new chess superstar (1936-7)

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In Part II of our series marking the centenary of the birth of Paul Keres, Joosep Grents looks at how the 20-year-old Estonian star dazzled the 1930s chess world with a series of spectacular games. In *Part I* we saw how Keres established himself as the Estonian no. 1 and burst onto the international scene at the 1935 Olympiad. In only the next two years he was an Olympiad gold medallist, supertournament winner and strong contender for the World Championship title. Relive that era, with great games and quotes that will have you comparing those players to the current chess elite.

Paul Keres (right) takes on Vladimirs Petrovs in a friendly match between Estonia and Latvia in 1938 | photo: Artur Kalm, *Estonian National Archive*

As before, we've collected almost all the games described so you can replay them with modern computer analysis and the chance to try out your own moves on the board:

	White	Evaluation	Black
1	GM Alekhine, A.	○ ½ - ½ ●	GM Keres, Paul
2	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	IM Richter, K.
3	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	IM Steiner, L.
4	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Alekhine, A.
5	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Fine, Reuben
6	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	Hromadka, K.

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

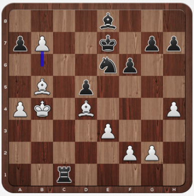
Paul Keres II: The Road to Mastery (1936-1937)

by Joosep Grents

Immediately after the match with Schmidt, Keres travelled to Germany to take part in the Bad Nauheim tournament, alongside Alekhine, who was still licking his wounds following his 1935 World Championship match against Euwe. Other prominent participants included Bogoljubov, Vidmar and Stahlberg. The frivolous self-confidence seen during Keres' match with Schmidt was suddenly nowhere to be seen. Keres admits he attempted to play more carefully, "to leave a solid impression". And what an impression he left. First the central game of the tournament: *Alekhine 1/2-1/2 Keres, 1936*

Alekhine tried to take advantage of an initiative from the off. That led to a dynamic endgame filled with tactical nuances, a type of position in which the now ex-World Champion excelled. However, Keres also preferred such positions to those requiring dry defence. A cold-blooded tactical sequence allowed him to steer the game into a completely drawn position.

In the diagram position there followed **36...Nd8! 37.Bc5+ Ke6 38.b8=Q Nc6+! 39.Bxc6 Rb1+** and the queen was removed from the board.



Alekhine has just played 36.b7 - is it game over?

In his first individual international tournament Keres posted an impressive performance, not losing a single game and finding himself in the sole lead after beating Stahlberg in the last round. Alekhine was struggling to find a way to beat a German underdog, putting Keres on the verge of a perfect tournament debut, but the underdog finally succumbed, allowing Alekhine to join Keres on 6.5/9.

After the tournament, Alekhine was a little annoyed to find himself misquoted by "Chess" magazine:

> It is beyond doubt that *(Keres)* is a promising young player with extraordinary knowledge for his age, however the epithet "brilliant", which I was quoted as having used, is based on a mistranslation.

Heuer's interpretation:

> A diamond shines flawlessly, but Keres was at best still a raw gemstone with an uneven glint. Nobody could have predicted what the refinement process would bring.

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The need for Alekhine's clarification is apparent if one looks beyond the mere unbeaten result and examines Keres' games in Bad Neuheim. As Heuer observed, there was evidence of recklessness in his approach to the event:

> Over the course of nine rounds, Keres once blundered a piece, twice went on wild goose chases that left him playing endgames a pawn down, played a risky opening and ended up in a bad position, and twice was able to get an advantage out of the opening (although he lost the advantage in one of those games). The final tally: five "spoiled" and one bland game. However, he hit the jackpot on three occasions: against Alekhine, Vidmar and especially Stahlberg.

Keres' next tournament in Dresden showed how that recklessness could backfire.

> You can only imagine my joy after Bad Nauheim. However, the pressure proved to be too much for a player lacking in experience. And the reaction came two weeks later in Dresden.

First a loss to Stahlberg. A promising win against Grob was then followed by a cascade of losses to Alekhine, Engels and Helling. After draws against Bogoljubov and Rödl, the win that followed over Sämisch was little consolation. 3.5/9 and 8-9th place in a 10-player field.

> The world of chess was confused: which was a bigger surprise, my success in Bad Nauheim or my failure in Dresden? I prefer to believe the former.

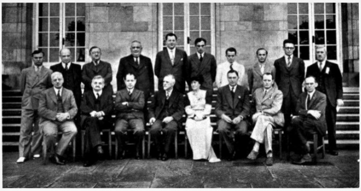
Harald defended his brother:

> My brother's youthful performances have often been analysed and criticised, and his temporary setbacks explained away as the frivolity of youth. This is not right. By what logic can we expect a young, inexperienced person, whose upbringing took place in the yard of a rented dwelling in Narva, and who then found himself totally alone in international company, encountering gentlemen like Capablanca and noblemen of the calibre of Alekhine... to behave as an equal partner in this environment?

Keres got his next chance to prove himself in Zandvoort, where he filled in for the young Botvinnik, who had turned down his invitation. The field in Zandvoort was again strong: World Champion Euwe, Grünfeld, young Fine, Maroczy, and Tartakower, to name just a few. Three losses - to Euwe, Fine and Maroczy - meant that Keres could not climb higher than 3rd place. Understandably, it was Fine who took centre stage with his +6, outpacing Euwe's +5. Tartakower had a curious note:

> Lately it has become clear that the best tournament players have been Reshevsky and Fine, both avoiding refined opening theory and exhibiting the triumph of common sense over flashes of 'creativity'. The main subject of discussion in Zandvoort was determining the style of Fine, whose wins are somehow unnoticeable, while he saved his other games with numerous daring *salto mortales*. The experts were finally able to conclude that Fine's style is based on the lack of one.

This reminds us that in the context of the world chess scene, Keres was merely a drop in the ocean of promising young players, amongst whom he perhaps remained the most mysterious or unpredictable, following these results.



Keres didn't play in the 1936 Nottingham tournament, but it was a who's who of the 20-year-old's rivals. Standing (from left): Fine, Tartakower, Vidmar, Bogoljubow, Tyler, Alexander, Flohr, Reshevsky, Botvinnik, Mackenzie. Sitting: Thomas, Lasker, Capablanca, (tournament sponsor and his wife), Euwe, Alekhine, Winter | photo: *endgame.nl*

The youngsters met the elite in Nottingham in 1936. Not only did the field in Nottingham feature three ex-World Champions (Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine), the reigning World Champion (Euwe), but also the aforementioned Fine, the resilient Reshevsky, the pragmatic Flohr and the World Champion to be: Botvinnik. The young generation, led by Botvinnik and followed up by Fine and Flohr, proved they were not to be taken lightly. Botvinnik won the tournament by drawing with the top half of the table and getting +6 from the bottom. Despite sharing ten points with Capablanca, he beat him on tiebreaks due to having no losses, as opposed to Capablanca's loss to Flohr. The young generation was full of surprises, and while Keres might not yet have been part of the elite, he was preparing some surprises of his own.

Interlude: Munich Olympiad

"The world has declared a boycott a viable option, as chess players do not appreciate being categorised based on any criteria other than their playing strength. The least tolerable is the distinction between an Aryan and a non-Aryan." (Uudisleht)

There was considerable uncertainty when it came to the Olympiad in Munich. The Nazis did all they could to make the event serve their ideology, but they were unable to persuade the English to move the schedule of the Nottingham event and thus the true elite were at Nottingham while the rest faced each other in Nazi Germany. That is, if the latter decided to participate. FIDE did not recognise this as an official Olympiad, but did not boycott the event either, as the Nazis lifted the ban on Jews for the time being, and FIDE thus left every federation to decide for itself whether to participate or not. For some players, though, it was a matter of principle. Spielmann refused to participate and declared publicly that his dignity and discretion do not allow him to play in a location where he meets only temporary tolerance.

The Estonians, meanwhile, were troubled by their usual issues of a less political nature. Uncertainty with regards to participation endured until a week before the start of the event. With the finances sorted out, "Uudisleht" then reported that the Estonian team had the head of a lion, but the tail of a mouse. This was not a mere exaggeration, for instead of the regular four boards, Munich featured matches on eight boards and the second strongest Estonian player, Paul Felix Schmidt, had to stay home due to health issues.

BRASILIEN
FINNLAND
DÄNEMARK
LITAUEN
NORWEGEN

The sumptuously organised Munich Olympiad - for more photos see Edward Winter's compilation at chesshistory.com

With the elite in Nottingham and a substantial amount of players boycotting the Olympiad, one could hardly expect it to be a feast of the best chess masters. However, despite the lack of quality, the Nazi ideology dictated a necessity to impress the outside world. Accordingly, the hosts went out of their way to awe the participants, with the extravagant nature of the event not lost on the numerous delegations: extensive fireworks, excursions, performances, shows and receptions were unleashed to numb the minds of those who were there to stay sharp at the board. Those who took part in the event later admitted to never having witnessed its like before.

The tournament itself saw the lion roar in the playing hall, as Keres won individual gold on board one (15.5/20), with some fine games, including *Keres 1-0 Richter, 1936*, where he perfectly calculated a long endgame sequence that won by a single tempo.

Keres on the way to beating Yugoslav Champion Vasja Pirc in what appeared a dead-drawn ending | chesshistory.com

The Hungarian player Gedeon Barzca commented:

> It was during the Olympiad in 1936. He was 20, I was 25, and his fame had already reached me the previous year. I admired the game *Keres vs Winter, 1935* in which Keres was so elegantly able to convert his opening advantage into a win. After this example, and not having met him yet, I imagined a thin, quite serious gentleman, whose suggestive eyes would reflect his rich fantasy. However, what I was able to confirm after seeing him in Munich for the first time was only that he was thin. I met a cheerful and a vivacious young man, who in the company of his Estonian team gave me the impression of a wise-cracker sort of a guy rather than a serious chess master. Such a view did not last long. The next day I saw him behind the board and his cheerfulness had completely disappeared: he had transformed into a serious chess player who went on to beat the Hungarian Lajos Steiner *in an excellently executed endgame*.

Despite the lion's roar, the tail tallied a sobering 10th place for Estonia among 21 participating countries. Hungary triumphed with 20 wins in a row, something which wasn't repeated until 1960. After the Olympiad and Nottingham, the world chess scene, and Keres with it, became relatively quiet. Keres stayed at home for the next half a year, but that calm was merely the eye of the storm.

The shoe fits

During the long ‘inactive’ months Keres received the Champion's title from the International Correspondence Chess Association, won the Estonian Correspondence Champion's title and was able to win a training tournament ahead of Schmidt, a feat described as ‘natural’ by the local media - mind you, a year ago, such a statement would have seemed rather inconceivable. Keres toured the country with simultaneous exhibitions (+76 =5 -4) and, having received invitations to participate in the prestigious Semmering and Kemeri tournaments, faced the question of how to prepare. In the end he chose to participate in as many small tournaments as possible. Heuer:

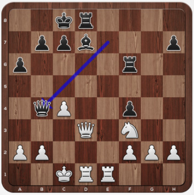
> Young men should not be afraid of a lack of energy, but their lack of experience, and not one of the players invited to Semmering had less experience than Keres. This decision not only benefited himself, but also enriched one of the most wonderful years of chess.

First up was Margate, which featured Alekhine and Fine amongst a somewhat inferior field. The contest was set to take place between the Alekhine-Fine-Keres trio. They first faced the lesser players and everyone expected them to force their way through with a 4/4 start, but Alekhine blundered in a completely winning position against local player Buerger. "64" wrote:

> When the game between Alekhine and Buerger was adjourned, Alekhine went for some whiskey and then resigned. The irritated man then said: "The next seven rounds will show if I can afford to give an extra point to Fine”.

Apparently he didn’t consider Keres a threat at all. Perhaps this was Alekhine's second mistake in the tournament, which eventually proved to be the last nail in his coffin: *Keres 1-0 Alekhine 1937*

Before clicking on the link above, can you spot Keres' famous winning move?



In a difficult position Alekhine has just played 22…Qb4?

After the next round, Fine was able to catch up with Keres and the leaders faced each other in the final game, which ended up full of mutual mistakes and eventually culminated in shared first place. Keres remained critical of himself: “I felt that I still lacked the necessary endgame technique.” Others did not share that view:

Šachový týden:

> The extraordinary combinational ability of Keres left a deep impression on all the participants. If one takes into consideration that he is merely 21 years old, then one can certainly foresee his future fame. The only factor that speaks against him is his modesty. No player with aspirations of becoming a World Champion has ever been known for this characteristic.

A lucky guess, or a prophetic insight?

After Margate, Fine and Keres faced each other in Ostende, Belgium, where they were the only first class players. Keres destroyed Fine *without any particular effort*, as the atmosphere in Ostende suffused the players. Organizer Kmoch:

> The participants are for the most part relaxed, maybe even too relaxed. They live in an exquisite hotel and act like noble guests. Everyone can spend time in a free-for-all casino, where one can become a millionaire from a mere five franks start. The numerous open-all-night taverns constantly attempt to beat each other with the lowest prices. Living here is beautiful, but tournament play is not easy, especially for up-and-coming grandmasters.

The relaxed atmosphere did not leave Keres or Fine untouched. Keres remembers his game with Grob:

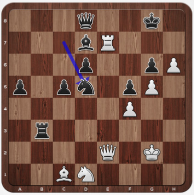
> In the fourth round I achieved a brilliant position against Grob, then lost a pawn for nothing and ruined my position. However, I still somehow managed to equalize, but then I lost on time! Grob was in time pressure just before the time control on move 51, but he handled it well. Then I had about 20 minutes to make my 51st move, but I forgot that I needed to make one more move and I lost on time!

After tying for first with Grob and Fine, Keres then went on to Prague and Vienna, both of which were lower rated tournaments. The Czechoslovakians were eager to see the ‘Northern Miracle’ (“Česke Slovo”) and at the opening ceremony of the tournament even attempted to welcome Keres in Estonian. Keres returned the courtesy and scored 10/11, only drawing with his friend-to-be Karel Opočensky and Sonja Graf.

Česke Slovo wrote:

> He differed greatly from the other participants. He surprised everyone with his modesty and concentration on the game. He did not care for entertainment. With this, he impressed both the players and spectators.

Another puzzle - can you spot the elegant move and idea that caused Karel Hromadka to resign, since mate is inevitable?



Position after Hromadka's 35…Nxd5?

Replay the game: *Keres 1-0 Hromadka, 1937*

His trip to Vienna was described by Deutsche Schachblätteris:

> The chess family of Vienna was able to witness the play of one of the most intriguing chess personalities. He is modest. But his games! It is beyond doubt that he possesses the greatest tactical ability, most natural frenzy and most invigorating play of all the living players of our time. These are the same characteristics which had the chess world in awe of Paul Morphy (the same first name). Such men invigorate new chess followers a thousand times more effectively than the 'safety-first' players whose results might be more consistent.

Contrasting styles

The highest epithets were not thrown around without reason. 1937 had so far seen Keres win all the tournaments in which he participated. The comparisons with Morphy were a result of his style, which contrasted to that of many other players at the time. As mentioned earlier, Fine was speculated to have no particular style or stylistic preference, while another particular stylistic contrast was provided by the Czechoslovak giant Salomon Flohr.

Romanovski highlighted Flohr's famous quote, "I personally prefer to sacrifice the pawns of my opponent" and believed that behind this quote lay a series of harmful principles. He concluded that Flohr is a victim of excessive sobriety. Flohr protested:

Botvinnik in his 1933 Moscow/Leningrad match against Flohr | photo: Hundert Jahr Schach Zweikampfe/*Wikipedia*

> A chess player of our time has to foresee the plans of his opponent, uncover tactical combinations, make use of microscopic advantages and understand the dynamics of chess. This is not a mere question of professional technique. I find it a lot easier to calculate a ten-move forced sequence than to find the only correct move in a strategically plain position.

Flohr's insistence on technique is perhaps best exemplified by his game against Botvinnik:

- *Flohr 1-0 Botvinnik, 1933*

In commenting the endgame, where he proved the superiority of two bishops against two knights, he notes:

> This endgame would never have been played if it had occurred 20-25 years ago and would have been called a draw. However, I was able to demonstrate that by using the achievements of modern technique this endgame is winnable. For the admirers of 'Immortal Games' such a game might be worthless, or seem the most boring of all chess studies. However, Alekhine identified this almost as the peak of the modern game.

His purely pragmatic approach was described by Reinfeld:

> Flohr is a statistical player who knows that in a tournament with a certain number of participants, he needs a particular number of points. For this he has to prevail against the weaker players and drop half a point to the stronger and, above all, exploit every possible opportunity. Such chess might inadvertently appear boring to many, but that is not the case. Flohr's game is full of elegant strategic nuances, minuscule drama and glorious examples of how to convert winning positions into wins. The ideal that once was characterised by spectacular tactical play will give way, and has already given way, to the ideal of perfect technique.

But had it really? While Reinfeld's prediction might hold true today, it appears the early Keres was a clear exception to this trend. Keres was largely perceived as the descendant of Alekhine, for he appeared to favour aggressive tactics over solid technique. Prior to Keres' visit to Czechoslovakia, Šachový Týden had characterised him as follows:

> **Paul Keres - the Paganini of Chess**
>
> Keres is the most admirable phenomenon in chess at the moment. In one and a half years he has produced a quantity of brilliant games that few could manage in a lifetime. The Keres oeuvre defies categorisation. He stands alone, without predecessors, and all who attempt to copy his style will fail to do so without getting punished. In future 'Paul Keres' will be written into the history of chess with golden letters, yet there will be no school of Keres. He alone can play in such a neck-breaking style where everything appears to be hanging by a thread, yet despite appearances every eventuality has been accounted for! In the games of Keres there are moments where other masters would crash their ships on the rocks, situations that have been pushed to the limits of absurdity. When you play through those games you will get the impression of a preposterous dance on the edge of the abyss, but once you analyse them dispassionately the logic and ingeniousness of Keres suddenly strike you. A man with such passion is a true chess Paganini who can play his devilish melodies on just one string.

Published in 1937, you might consider this poetic description partly an attempt to 'sell' the visit to Prague, but, as we saw earlier, his 10/12 score did not disappoint the believers in such poetic descriptions. Heuer, on the contrary, disagreed and noted that the remarks were largely the result of a lack of proper knowledge of the youngster's nature and his creations. For despite the early comparisons with Alekhine and his highly tactical play, Keres claimed that the four tournaments mentioned above were played to serve the evolution of his positional play. Opočenský remembers that during the tournament in Prague, Keres claimed that considering him a descendant of Alekhine is incorrect, for he finds it much easier to relate to Capablanca's style of clear strategic play. In a later interview Alekhine agreed that Keres' style resembles that of his own, but also added, "It's true that Keres believes himself to be more of a soul-mate of Capablanca's."

Šacha Māksla observed at the same time:

> Keres is not only an ingenious tactician, but he has also not forgotten the true value of positional play.

Max Euwe adopted the same theme:

> During the first years of his career aggression was the dominant element of his playing style, but very soon he managed harmoniously to intertwine strategy and tactics, allowing him to defeat the greatest players of his time like Alekhine and Capablanca.

Be that as it may, the journalists continued to consider Keres the unique representative of Alekhine-like poetic play, as someone always able to bring tournaments to life. While he might have not agreed with such a representation, it is beyond doubt that Keres' early games exhibited aspects reminiscent of Alekhine's style. The same might be said of almost every talented young player, but maintaining that style and continuing to play stunning attacking games which enthuse the public imagination is something few can manage.

Keres may have created no school of chess, but he went on to teach future generations | photo (from an exhibition in the Keres museum in Tallinn): Vladimir Barsky, *Russian Chess Federation*

First supertournaments

The real tests began in Kemeri, Latvia. The field of 18 players included names such as Alekhine, Euwe, Reshevsky, Fine, Keres, Tartakower, Flohr, Steiner and Petrovs, making up a fierce field of competitors with no clear-cut favourite. Petrovs did not consider Keres capable of finishing in the top four, based on the fact that Keres had so far participated in lesser tournaments with one to three clear favourites in a weaker field. Alekhine claimed his rivals were Fine, Flohr, Reshevsky and Keres, with the latter singled out for his interesting style - but which style would prevail?

Keres travelled to Latvia at the last moment, taking the bus during the day of the first round and thus arriving late for his first game - another reason for the press to speak about his carelessness. He did not have an impressive start - 2/5, then 3.5/7. After 7 rounds, Reshevsky's sprint had seen him demolish both Fine and Keres and landed him on an impressive 6.5/7. However, his streak was then cut short by Alekhine in the next round. The ex-champion almost danced off the stage in joy amidst the ovation of the Latvian crowd: "Long live Alekhine!" Heuer noted that the now French representative was quite nervous throughout the tournament. In his game against Landau, he even tried to make two moves in a row. However, his drinking days seemed behind him. "Postimees":

> Alekhine now drinks milk and eats chocolate. The board is no longer filled with unfinished cigarettes.

The ex-champion was clearly motivated to get into the best shape possible in order to regain his throne from Euwe in the upcoming match.

As Keres started to improve his tournament position, news reached Latvia that the Dutch Chess Federation had announced plans to arrange a Candidates Tournament in 1938 to decide the World Championship challenger. The field of eight players had been announced and included Keres. Such recognition surely boosted the motivation of the young Keres and saw him climb to 7/11. The surprise of the tournament was perhaps the local hero Vladimirs Petrovs, who shared second place with Flohr after 11 rounds on 8/11. Reshevsky was still in the lead with a superb 9.5/11. In the 12th round Keres *played an interesting rook sacrifice against Steiner* and managed to catch Alekhine at 8/12. The tournament started to heat up.

Postimees:

> A battle of words at the Kemeri tournament. Alekhine to Flohr: "So that you will not finish second here in Kemeri, I will only play for a draw with Petrovs tonight". He then grabs a pen and marks his upcoming game with Petrovs as a draw on the tournament table. Tournament organizer Kmoch quickly erases the draw from the table and cautions Alekhine.

Heuer:

> The reason? Böök had not made a move in his game against the ex-champion and waited for the game to be adjourned - he did not want to ruin his drawn position - so he walked around the hall instead. Alekhine then poured out his anger on Flohr.

How did Keres play? Kmoch accounted for it:

> The way Keres treats some of his games is occasionally too careless, which often results in the threat of losing. Yet it appears as if he gives these chances to his opponents out of mere playfulness... He loves danger. After about a year or two of steady development the world could have a genius to bow down to.

His style certainly continued to attract praise, despite the occasional mishaps. However, was it enough to win in Kemeri?

Over the course of the rest of the tournament Reshevsky's sprint lost momentum and before the last round the winner was still unclear (1st Reshevsky 12/16, 2nd-3rd Flohr and Petrovs 11.5/16, 4th-5th Alekhine and Keres 11/16). Reshevsky, who had led the tournament throughout, then pushed for a win against Böök and his unnecessary risk resulted in a loss. Petrovs and Flohr faced each other. Flohr's style dictated a draw, despite the game being well-fought. That meant that if Keres or Alekhine were able to beat their inferior Latvian opponents the tournament would see first place shared among five players! However, neither Alekhine nor Keres was able to beat his Latvian counterpart and both settled for draws. The first place was then shared between Flohr, Petrovs and Reshevsky. Flohr's statistical style had not let him down. Draws with the top 10 of the tournament were boosted by 7 wins against the bottom of the table and saw him soar to victory. Had Reinfeld been right after all?

Chess Review:

> Young Keres was a mere half a point from shared first place. However, the fact that this result is considered poor merely shows how high the evaluation of Keres really is.

After Kemeri, Keres and Flohr traveled to Pärnu along with Tartakower, Opočenský and Stahlberg. The provincial town suddenly buzzed with excitement as never before, as the visitors were joined by locals Schmidt, Raud and Villard to play a tournament of unprecedented strength for the location. And that buzz soon turned to bravos as the two Pauls took the first two places, though not in the order expected. Paul Felix Schmidt had beaten both Flohr and Keres to clinch first place, later commenting, "My success did not strike me as surprising".

This result greatly boosted the Estonian Olympiad hopes, as Stockholm, which was now just around the corner, would see Estonia sending two strong GMs.

Not found

FIDE makes its mark in Stockholm

Juan Antonio Samaranch - the former IOC president - would traditionally praise almost every Olympics as "the best ever", so it's no surprise that Olympic organisers strive for that praise. While not being accepted as part of the Olympics, the Chess Olympiads are no different in this regard. And while the Germans had pulled off an unforgettable feat, Stockholm had no plans to be one iota less of an event.

Magyar Sakkvilag:

> We have to speak plainly and admit that every earlier effort has been exceeded. It is obvious that all the other host nations are hospitable and put their best efforts into offering the best to their guests, but one must not forget that Sweden is not only a beautiful but a happy land, untouched by war for nearly two hundred years. Finding food, shelter, social order or employment is easy, so nothing has been allowed to hinder an increase in social comforts.

The course of the Olympiad was well described by Šachový Týden:

> The 11th and 12th August have their own meaning. They mark that time of the year when stars fall from the constellation of Perseus. The current year saw a record breaking amount of stars falling, but on this occasion the stars did not only fall in Perseus, but in Stockholm.

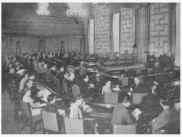
The previously unknown Thorsten Gauffin went on to beat both Euwe and Keres, Euwe then lost to Lilienthal and the falling stars also included Reshevsky, who lost to Piazzini and Castaldi. Šachový Týden continued:

> Not only did stars fall, but whole constellations. This is a new notion in astronomy. Thus Finland beat Estonia 3.5-0.5.

That did not go down well at home. Uudisleht:

> The most humiliating result of the Olympiad - a loss to Finland. We were treated to a "Finnish sauna!"

In the end Estonia came 7th as the Americans triumphed for the fourth consecutive official Olympiad (excluding Munich). Keres took individual silver on the first board with 11/15, while Flohr won gold with 12.5/16.



The FIDE General Assembly at the 1937 Stockholm Olympiad | photo: *chesshistory.com*

However, Stockholm was not only relevant in terms of the chess played on the board but the chess to be played in the proposed AVRO tournament. A FIDE Congress was held in Stockholm to reach a decision on the matter, and while everyone was expecting the World Chess Federation to welcome the opportunity with open arms, nothing of the sort took place. The Candidates Tournament concept was voted down with 4 in favour and 8 against. It was then decided that the challenger would be chosen immediately in Stockholm by a vote. Classic FIDE! The vote had two rounds: the first round had five candidates (Botvinnik, Capablanca, Fine, Flohr or Keres) while the second was between the top two scorers from the first round. It was expected that Capablanca would be the natural choice, but the result left Capablanca fans utterly dejected. Flohr - 6 votes, Capablanca - 4 votes, everyone else - 1 vote. The Czechoslovak player then took second round victory with 8 votes to 5. FIDE had thus chosen an official challenger for the winner of the upcoming Alekhine - Euwe rematch by a simple vote.

It goes without saying that such a decision was controversial. As *Winter* puts it:

> With Flohr designated as the official challenger, the scene was set for the chess world's first major outcry against officialdom.

CHESS was particularly annoyed:

> The FIDE has shown itself, at Stockholm, supremely unfitted for the task. It has shown already more bias, stupidity and incompetence than any world champion ever did.
>
> Euwe, Alekhine, all the "candidates", welcomed this wonderful proposal *(from the Dutch Chess Federation)*. The whole chess world would have welcomed it with open arms.
>
> The FIDE rejected it!
>
> The reasons for this crassly stupid decision are hard to find. You can send ten very wise men into a committee room and they may make a very stupid committee. Invoke the curse of Babel and the confusion is intensified. Add a group of men whose heads are slightly puffed by the positions they have attained, and who are spitefully jealous of any scheme to which their own name is not affixed, and you get results like this.
>
> …It is almost superfluous to add that the FIDE, still floundering like an inebriated elephant, managed to reject Capablanca's claims as official challenger in favour of Flohr's.

> Get better men! Mr Rueb and his delegates are not gods. If a labourer makes a mess of his job, he is sacked. If an engineer makes a bad blunder, he loses his job. The present FIDE is obviously incompetent. We should sack the lot!

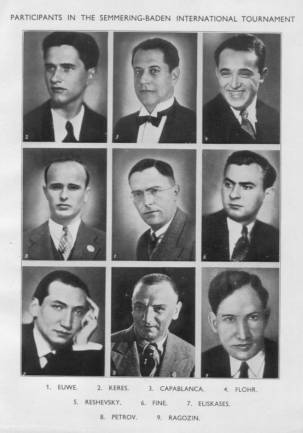
Even Alekhine was disturbed:

> Everything with regard to that decision is unintelligible and shocking. In particular, the rush. After all, they could have waited for my match with Euwe, on which so much rests.

However, there was one man in this whole mess who remained silent. On such occasions he always preferred silence.

Dazzling in Semmering/Baden

After failed attempts to organise a colossal tournament, the Austrian organisers settled for a clash of eight: Capablanca, Eliskases, Fine, Flohr, Keres, Ragozin, Reshevsky and Petrovs.


PARTICIPANTS IN THE SEMMERING-BADEN INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENT
2
3
4
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1
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1. EUWE. 2. KERES. 3. CAPABLANCA. 4. FLOHR.
5. RESHEVSKY. 6. FINE. 7. ELISKASES.
8. PETROV. 9. RAGOZIN.

An illustration from the CHESS monograph on Semmering-Baden 1937 | photo: *chesshistory.com*

Euwe served as the chief arbiter for the first half of the tournament and gave his pre-tournament account of the players:

> Semmering must show who is the most vigorous grandmaster. Although I do not think Capablanca will be able to win, I regard him as a more suitable challenger than Flohr... Despite this, the main favourite in Semmering is Flohr. His deep and solid style is the best guarantee... Keres is an artist. His fantasy allows the creation of the most fascinating tactical combinations, but he does not play solidly enough. He will not get ahead of Capablanca or Flohr with his sacrificial combinations. It is in Semmering where he has to take his exam to prove his readiness for a potential World Championship match.

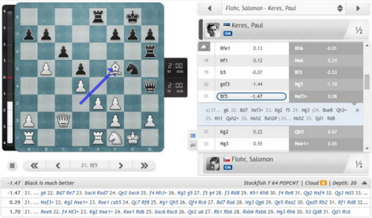
Keres himself did not have high hopes for the tournament:

> I went to Semmering without much hope of a major success, as my relatively limited tournament experience meant that I had no real hope of fighting on a level footing with such names as Capablanca, Reshevsky, Fine and Flohr.

One has to take this assessment with a grain of salt, but it’s true that Semmering was first and foremost expected to play out as a duel between Capablanca and Flohr.

“Does not play solidly enough,” haunted Keres already in the early rounds. In his first round game against Flohr, Keres sacrificed a bishop, and later described it as follows:

> The game between Keres and Flohr first developed slowly, that is until I *sacrificed my bishop on f3*, hoping to achieve a quick advantage. However, my long calculations were faulty, so that instead of achieving an advantage, I lost a bishop and a knight for a rook and two pawns. My position became miserable and I lost another pawn. I then started exploiting every possible opportunity that White gave me, and with Flohr not finding the best moves I soon reached a drawn position.



	Rfe1	0.13	Rh6	-0.01
18	Nf1	0.12	Ne6	0.24
19	b5	-0.07	Bf3	-0.53
20	gxf3	-1.44	Ng5	-1.19
21	Bf5	-1.47	Nxf3+	0.08
22	Kg2	0.22	Qh5	0.67
23	Ng3	0.55	Nxe1+	0.65

a) 21... g6 22. Bd7 Nxf3+ 23. Kg2 f5 24. Ng3 (24. Bxe8 Qh3+ 25. Kh1 Qxh2+ 26. Nxh2 Rxh2#) 24... Nxh2 25. Qd1 Rd8

-1.47	Black is much better — Stockfish 7 64 POPCNT | Cloud | Depth: 20
-1.47	21. ... g6 22. Bd7 Re7 23. bxc6 Rxd7 24. Qe2 bxc6 25. f4 Nh3+ 26. Kg2 g5 27. f5 g4 28. f3 Rd8 29. Kh1 Kh8 30. f4 Re8 31. Qg2 Nxf4 32. Qg3 Nd3 33. ...
0.29	21. ... Nxf3+ 22. Kg2 Nxe1+ 23. Rxe1 cxb5 24. Qc7 Rf8 25. Kg1 Qh5 26. Qf4 Rc6 27. Bd7 Ra6 28. Ng3 Qg6 29. Qe5 Rxa2 30. Qxd5 Rb2 31. Rf1 Rd8 32....
1.70	21. ... Ree6 22. f4 Nf3+ 23. Kg2 Nxe1+ 24. Rxe1 Rd6 25. bxc6 Rxc6 26. Qe2 a6 27. Rb1 Rb6 28. Rxb6 Rxb6 29. Ng3 Rh6 30. h3 Qd8 31. Qd1 Rc6

If the game was played today Keres would have learned immediately afterwards that his 19…Bf3!! sacrifice was completely correct, and only 21…Nxf3 (not 21…g6!) was a "blunder" - though the position is extremely complex. Don't miss *replaying the whole game* to see the remarkable trip Keres' king makes on a board full of menace

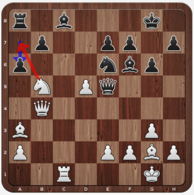
This trend continued in Rounds 2 and 3 as well, as Keres had to exhibit all his skill as an escape artist to maintain a 50% score. In the 4th game he was able to beat Petrovs, whose KID stumbled in time trouble (5 minutes for 18 moves). This concluded the part of the tournament played in Semmering, with the players then travelling to Baden. The play of Keres in Semmering had hardly been inspiring, but when play continued in Baden, Keres got off to a storming start and *defeated Eliskases with the double-edged Sicilian Wing Gambit*. In his letters sent home he casually remarked:

> According to the tournament committee, this was the most beautiful game of the tournament so far.

That was followed by a display of *beating Reshevsky in an ending* in Round 6 - a game which Keres described as “my best endgame technique so far”. Even Capablanca seemed to falter, as Keres won a pawn in their seventh round game and then entered a rook endgame where only he could win. However, in his first game against the Cuban genius, Keres was unable to put the icing on the cake and Capablanca escaped with a draw. With the first half of the tournament over, Keres found himself in the lead on 5/7. Keres:

> This gave me new courage and energy, and in the following four rounds I played a series of my best pre-war games.

Indeed, the “solid” *Flohr found himself utterly crushed after a brilliant 20th move by Keres.*



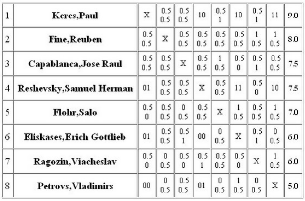
Keres met Flohr's 19…a6? with 20.Na7! and won four moves later

The next scalps were of Ragozin and Petrovs. Fine was then able to break Keres’ winning streak and interpose a draw into this series of brilliant games. However, the draw seemed to have little significance, for with three rounds to play, the lead had already extended to a full two points, as Fine was closest to Keres’ 8.5/11 on 6.5/11. Three rounds to play and victory guaranteed. Or was it? Keres had not got to where he had by playing solid chess, and despite being in a position where almost every tournament player would opt for a solid approach, Keres went haywire. As he later described it:

> Even at this tournament I was unable to rid myself of the careless approach that I had so often had in decisive games. Nowadays I would have played calmly in such a situation, or at least not opted for sharp attempts at victory. But what did I do back then? In the next round Eliskases played for a draw with White, but instead of accepting a draw I decided to opt for risky play for a win and was soon forced to concede my first defeat of the tournament. And after a subsequent loss to Reshevsky, I was forced to put great effort into keeping Capablanca at bay in the last round to ensure first place.

All of this was, however, quickly forgotten, for the final table spoke for itself.

Semmering/Baden 1937



1	**Keres,Paul**	X	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	10	0.5 1	10	0.5 1	11	9.0
2	**Fine,Reuben**	0.5 0.5	X	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	1 0.5	1 0.5	8.0
3	**Capablanca,Jose Raul**	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	X	0.5 0.5	1 0.5	0.5 0	0.5 1	0.5 0.5	7.5
4	**Reshevsky,Samuel Herman**	01	0.5 0.5	0.5 0.5	X	0.5 0.5	11	0.5 0	10	7.5
5	**Flohr,Salo**	0.5 0	0.5 0.5	0 0.5	0.5 0.5	X	1 0.5	0.5 0.5	1 0.5	7.0
6	**Eliskases,Erich Gottlieb**	01	0.5 0.5	0.5 1	00	0 0.5	X	0.5 1	0 0.5	6.0
7	**Ragozin,Viacheslav**	0.5 0	0 0.5	0.5 0	0.5 1	0.5 0.5	0.5 0	X	1 0.5	6.0
8	**Petrovs,Vladimirs**	00	0 0.5	0.5 0.5	01	0 0.5	1 0.5	0 0.5	X	5.0

21-year-old Paul Keres had won his first supertournament | source: *Wikipedia*

Šachový Týden joked that the duel between Capablanca and Flohr had been won by Keres. Furthermore, Keres was the focus of everyone's attention and praise not only due to his own result, but the results of the other favourites, as they had drawn the great majority of their games (Fine 12 draws out of 14 games, Capablanca 11, Flohr 10).

Chess Review:

> Keres never cares about the name of his opponent. He plays in exactly the same fashion both against Capablanca or a third tier player. He loves to play chess, as a kitten loves to play with a ball of thread. Other masters breathe a sigh of relief once the game finishes, while Keres would happily play again. Such a love of chess is one of the reasons for his brilliant performances, but also explains the several tough moments at the final stages. He is a pleasant young man, his victory is very popular. He is even liked by his colleagues, other masters. Could we invite him to the US?

Šachový Týden:

> The situation in the chess world has turned upside down following the victory of Keres. The World Champion is Dr. Euwe, the current challenger is Alekhine, the official challenger is Flohr, the moral challenger is Capablanca, the most fitting candidate is Botvinnik, and the future challenger is Keres, who has won the sympathy of the chess world, for he can play chess better than all of them.

Even Alekhine had changed his mind about Keres. After being asked to highlight the best of the younger generation, he replied:

> Surely Keres. I have to admit that I did not appreciate him much last year, but he has grown and matured to such a degree since then that he is now the greatest hope of the young generation. I believe Capablanca seconds this assessment. Keres and Botvinnik! However, the play of the former is more enterprising, livelier and more likeable.

All praise aside, Keres obviously still justified Euwe's earlier assessment that "he does not play solidly enough". The ageing Lasker expressed a similar thought:

> Keres is indeed a very interesting, subtle and talented player. It is too early, though, to speak of him as a clear contender for the World Championship title. Let's hope that he will solidify his play, for only then is he capable of offering us any permanent value. You might be surprised that while praising Keres I am also setting demands on him, but after all, I have encountered many masters during the course of my career who the journalists would refer to as a 'young genius', a 'brilliant tactician' or a 'future World Champion'. Yet what did they achieve in practice?

It is fascinating that even in his best form, Keres still faltered in the last rounds, or 'became careless' as we are told. 'Carelessness' was not merely a word employed by the scandal-seeking journalists, but by Keres himself. And in a situation where even the most hot-tempered people would likely have adopted a solid approach, Keres went crazy. What could be the cause of this? Deeper psychological reasons? Heuer puts the question out there, but no definitive answer is forthcoming. Given the Candidates Tournaments which followed later in Keres' career, isn't this the ultimate question?

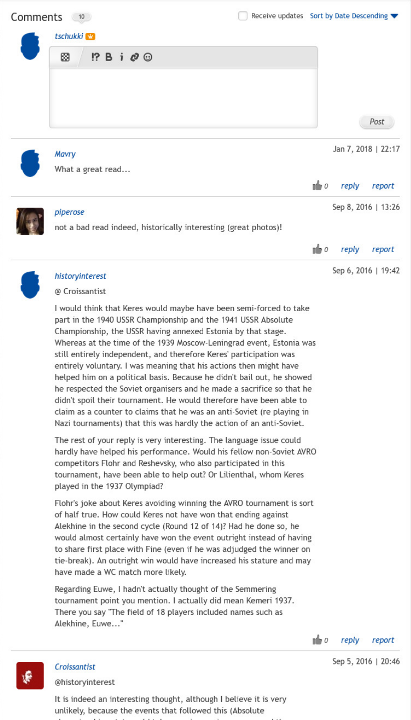
About the author

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.

See also:

- *Paul Keres I: Prince without a Crown*



Mavry Jan 7, 2018 | 22:17

What a great read...

piperose Sep 8, 2016 | 13:26

not a bad read indeed, historically interesting (great photos)!

historyinterest Sep 6, 2016 | 19:42

@ Croissantist

I would think that Keres would maybe have been semi-forced to take part in the 1940 USSR Championship and the 1941 USSR Absolute Championship, the USSR having annexed Estonia by that stage. Whereas at the time of the 1939 Moscow-Leningrad event, Estonia was still entirely independent, and therefore Keres' participation was entirely voluntary. I was meaning that his actions then might have helped him on a political basis. Because he didn't bail out, he showed he respected the Soviet organisers and he made a sacrifice so that he didn't spoil their tournament. He would therefore have been able to claim as a counter to claims that he was an anti-Soviet (re playing in Nazi tournaments) that this was hardly the action of an anti-Soviet.

The rest of your reply is very interesting. The language issue could hardly have helped his performance. Would his fellow non-Soviet AVRO competitors Flohr and Reshevsky, who also participated in this tournament, have been able to help out? Or Lilienthal, whom Keres played in the 1937 Olympiad?

Flohr's joke about Keres avoiding winning the AVRO tournament is sort of half true. How could Keres not have won that ending against Alekhine in the second cycle (Round 12 of 14)? Had he done so, he would almost certainly have won the event outright instead of having to share first place with Fine (even if he was adjudged the winner on tie-break). An outright win would have increased his stature and may have made a WC match more likely.

Regarding Euwe, I hadn't actually thought of the Semmering tournament point you mention. I actually did mean Kemeri 1937. There you say "The field of 18 players included names such as Alekhine, Euwe..."

Croissantist Sep 5, 2016 | 20:46

@historyinterest

It is indeed an interesting thought, although I believe it is very unlikely, because the events that followed this (Absolute