Features

Dec 20, 2016 | 19:55 by *chess24 staff*

Paul Keres IV: The War Years

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In our *previous article* marking the centenary of the great Paul Keres, we saw him win the Avro Tournament but have his hopes of a World Championship match with Alexander Alekhine thwarted by the outbreak of World War II. The years that followed were full of upheavals, with Keres' native Estonia occupied first by the USSR, then Germany and then again the USSR. He found time to marry, have two children, and play in the USSR Championship, but his main concern was survival. Joosep Grents continues his account of Keres' life.

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КЕРЕС П.П.
ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР
БОТВИННИК М.М.

The war would ultimately see Keres become a Soviet grandmaster, with Mikhail Botvinnik the man to beat - here they clashed in the 1947 Chigorin Memorial | photo: Estonian National Archives

Once again you can replay the games mentioned in the article, with computer analysis, by clicking on a game in the selector below:

	White	Evaluation	Black
1	IM Mikenas, V.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Botvinnik, M.
2	GM Keres, Paul	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Botvinnik, M.
3	GM Alekhine, A.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Keres, Paul
4	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Bogoljubov
5	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	IM Mikenas, V.
6	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Smyslov, V.

« ‹ … 1938-1940 1941-1947 1948-1952 … › »

The War Years

by Joosep Grents

As war raged in Central Europe, the neutral Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were annexed by the Soviet Union and, on his return from the match with Euwe, Keres soon became a Soviet citizen. Jüri Rebane, a close friend, recalls:

> It so happened that during the July coup of 1940, Keres was in Tallinn: he had arrived the night before and was staying at my place. In the morning he accompanied me on my way to work. We were walking up the Patkuli stairs together, looked toward Ilmarine and noticed some kind of a people's gathering, with lots of flags. We knew that something was going on, but what exactly, we didn't know. Paul drove back home the same day. *(...)*
>
> In the evening I visited my friend at Paldiski Street. Can you imagine - a red flag was flying on top of the Pikk Hermann tower! The next morning it was blue, black and white again - and so it remained until the official decision was taken.

Regular people at the time had little information about what exactly was happening, as illustrated by the example above: information that one could trust was very scarce. The annexation of the Baltic territories meant that the Lithuanian Mikenas, the Latvian Petrovs as well as the Estonian Keres were eligible to participate in the 1940 Soviet Championship, while Botvinnik, Smyslov, Lilienthal, Ragozin, Bondarevsky and many others ensured that the tournament was hotly contested. First and foremost, however, it was expected to play out as a duel between Botvinnik and Keres, both of whom still had the right to challenge Alekhine in the back of their minds. Botvinnik:

> The main point of interest is to see who will represent the Soviet Union in the World Championship match.

Curiously, despite playing for the Soviet Union, the Keres of 1940 could hardly speak any Russian and used a translator for his post-match commentary, which he did in German. He did not hurry to study Russian, probably since the outcome of the war was still far from clear, but the Soviet crowd was pleased to see him play for the USSR. His aristocratic behaviour provided a strong contrast to the usual Soviet chess scene. Sosonko:

> The appearance of Keres - a dark grey striped suit, a chain for his watch on his belt, handkerchief in the pocket of his suit, a sharply defined parting, and his manners - all of that was in sharp contrast to the uniformity that dominated Soviet Russia. His style of play was similarly remarkable: sharp and tactical. His affinity for the King's Gambit was almost an affront, especially against the backdrop of Botvinnik's deeply positional style.

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At the welcoming reception for the 1940 USSR Championship he received the warmest and longest round of applause from the crowd. Botvinnik, the Soviet chess number one, found the somewhat unusual crowd appreciation for Keres quite disturbing. In particular, after Keres' first round victory, the crowd, led by Sergei Prokofiev, clapped a little too loudly for Botvinnik's taste, which led him to lodge a protest. His complaints forced the organizers to prohibit clapping in the playing hall. Maria Keres remembers that Paul was stunned by the privileged standing of Botvinnik. He was not merely the number one on paper, but clearly acted that way as well, fully expecting to be treated as such.

In his later years, Botvinnik claimed that the excellent acoustics of the playing hall and the ill-disciplined crowd took a toll on his game, as neither Botvinnik nor Keres was able to prove dominance over the field. They had to settle for 6th and 4th places respectively after drawing their individual encounter. Instead, it was the star of Smyslov which suddenly started to burn brightly, and despite finishing half a point behind the winners Lilienthal and Bondarevsky, everyone was convinced this was only the beginning of Smyslov's road towards asserting a claim for the World Championship title. Meanwhile the Keres-Botvinnik conundrum had received no adequate answer in this tournament.

Absolute Championship

To solve the matter of who was to challenge Alekhine, 1941 featured a Soviet Absolute Championship between six top Soviet players: Botvinnik, Keres, Boleslavsky, Smyslov, Lilienthal and Bondarevsky. They played a quadruple round-robin over 20 rounds.

Keres wrote home during the tournament:

> The conditions are appropriate for Mishake, but not for the other contestants.

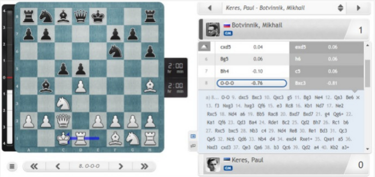
Mishake is the diminutive version of Misha in Estonian and a name Keres used when speaking about Botvinnik with those close to him, more often than not pronouncing the name with an ironic smile on his face.

Keres and Botvinnik got off to a 2/2 start, and then faced each other in *Keres 0-1 Botvinnik, 1941*. Heuer:

> Keres repeated the same variation which *Mikenas had used a year ago to defeat Botvinnik in the Soviet Championship*. Keres decided to repeat it without asking himself why Botvinnik was so eager to go along with it. Keres thus walked straight into the lion's den.

Keres had fallen victim to Botvinnik's preparation, since it was clear Botvinnik had gone to great lengths to analyse the line after his loss to Mikenas. Botvinnik:

> I employed **7...c5** against Mikenas. He replied **8.0-0-0**, came out of the opening with the better game and, after mistakes on both sides, gained victory. Keres was evidently impressed by my game against Mikenas and, without much hesitation, castled queenside.



Keres, Paul - Botvinnik, Mikhail

Botvinnik, Mikhail 1

	cxd5	0.04	exd5	0.06
6	Bg5	0.06	h6	0.06
7	Bh4	-0.10	c5	0.06
8	0-0-0	-0.76	Bxc3	-0.81

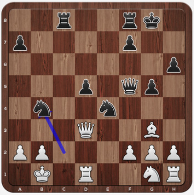
a) 8... 0-0 9. dxc5 Bxc3 10. Qxc3 g5 11. Bg3 Ne4 12. Qa3 Be6 13. f3 Nxg3 14. hxg3 Qf6 15. e3 Rc8 16. Kb1 Nd7 17. Ne2 Rxc5 18. Nd4 a6 19. Bb5 Rac8 20. Bxd7 Bxd7 21. g4 Qg6+ 22. Ka1 Qf6 23. Qd3 Ba4 24. Rde1 Bc2 25. Qd2 Bh7 26. Rc1 b6 27. Rxc5 bxc5 28. Nb3 c4 29. Nd4 Re8 30. Re1 Bd3 31. Qc3 Qe5 32. Nc6 Qd6 33. Nb4 d4 34. exd4 Rxe1+ 35. Qxe1 a5 36. Nxd3 cxd3 37. Qe3 Qa6 38. b3 Qc6 39. Qd2 a4 40. Kb2 a3+

Keres, Paul 0

Botvinnik played 8...0-0 against Mikenas, but had found 8...Bxc3! by the time he played Keres

> This apparently strong move leads to defeat. In reality, with an undeveloped kingside, exposing the king to the possibility of a direct attack by Black's pieces from the front (the c-file) as well as from the flank (the diagonal b1-h7) is, to say the least, risky!
>
> Against Mikenas I continued 8...0-0 without any worthwhile result.
>
> In November-December, 1940, I discovered the best course for Black. Great was my chagrin when in one of the January issues of *64* (1941) I saw the Belavenets-Simagin game, in which Simagin made the first two moves of the correct plan! Keres did not notice this game or he would of course have seen the light! So I was able to employ the prepared variation after all.

Keres resigned on move 22, but the game had long been hopeless:



Position after Botvinnik's 22...Nb4

Heuer notes that Keres was unrecognizable after this game, and for good reason, for despite having played such dominant games before, he had never had the chance to rehearse dealing with the consequences of being on the receiving end of such encounters. Heuer believes this left a mark on his subsequent play and perhaps even outlasted the tournament. Keres was additionally disappointed with not only the privileged status of Botvinnik but the everyday realities of the Soviet Union, and particularly annoyed with the curious rule that the participants were forbidden from speaking with each other and were not allowed to leave the playing hall during the game. Kasparov:

> All of this created an oppressive atmosphere, which was unusual for a person who had grown up amidst the free atmosphere of the tournaments of the West.

Keres finished second with 11/20 behind a dominant Botvinnik, who had won all his mini-matches and finished with 13.5/20. This further increased Botvinnik's chances of playing Alekhine, while diminishing those of Keres. Botvinnik:

> It was now clear who was to challenge Alekhine.

But the war had a mind of its own, and with Alekhine deeply entrenched in the German occupied territories, Operation Barbarossa distanced any hopes for a potential World Championship match.

The Years of German Occupation

The childhood misfortune which had led Keres to chess played yet another role in his story, for the broken hand he suffered in early childhood was enough for the medical committee to release him from military service. This was clearly a blessing for Keres, since many Estonians were now forced to serve in the Red Army and fight the Germans. However, the realities of Soviet everyday life in Estonia had depressed the population to such a degree that many deserted the Red Army and regarded the invading Germans as liberators of Estonia, choosing to fight on their side. It goes without saying that those who collaborated with the Germans and subsequently fought on the German side later faced execution or, if they were lucky, a life in a Gulag. Curiously, one has to note that those who had chosen to collaborate with the Soviets were also purged upon the arrival of the Germans. It's no wonder, then, that Estonia lost a fourth of its population as a result of the war. To put that into perspective, you would have had far greater chances of survival if you played Russian roulette instead. Keres was saved from this game of chance by the recklessness of his childhood, for one can only imagine what would have become of him if he had been forced to join any of the numerous occupational forces which swept through Estonia in the war years.

From June 1940 - June 1941 at least 60,000 Estonians were executed, conscripted or deported by the new Socialist authorities. Keres had many friends who were far from apolitical and who perished during this period. It should be no surprise, therefore, that Keres, like many other Estonians, could spare little sympathy for Socialism or the Soviet Union and might have held a degree of hope and sympathy for the arrival of the Wehrmacht forces in 1941. This goes to explain why Keres remained in Estonia and made no attempts to flee the upcoming German push. While many Estonians joined forces and formed paramilitary units which cooperated with the Germans in order to rid the territories of the Red Army, Keres made a conscious decision to keep a low profile, continuing his studies at the University of Tartu and attempting to refrain from making any political comments.

Maria and Paul at their wedding in 1941 | photo: ESM F 203:470/B 1841, *Estonian Sports Museum*

It was at university that he met his future wife, the Slavic philology student Maria Riives. She recalls:

> Paul was awfully modest - that's what enchanted me. And he was very observant of other people, especially me. He never forced his views or will upon others, although yes, he must have always gotten what he wanted.

Keres finished his studies at the university in 1941 and married Maria, with whom he had two children during the war: first in 1942 (Peeter) and then in 1943 (Kadrin). Both of them were, like Paul, born in wartime, but neither of them was born under the Soviets, for 1941 saw the Soviets retreat from the Baltics as the German push eastwards took its toll.

Keres' children Kadrin and Peeter | photo: ESM F 203:472/B 1843, *Estonian Sports Museum*

During the battles between the Germans and the Soviets, Keres remained in Tartu and was subjected to the horrors of the Battle of Tartu. A famous composer and a close friend of Keres, Eduard Tubin, recalls:

> We witnessed a very foul war. At very close range. They shot people. With machine guns. People were lined up for that. And curiously, Paul Keres had been part of one such line-up, as he later told me. They went to shelter from the bombings, into a large house. *(...)* The Russians were bombing heavily and there were numerous people hiding in the basement. And then one bomb got to the German commandant, who had gone up to the pantry and had started eating from the shelves, such a vermin he was. The bomb hit the door and the door hit the commandant, along with the shattered plaster. And then they claimed that this bomb was a guided one, that it had been guided, so somewhere someone had to have guided it. So a command was given: find such a man! So the soldiers ran and ran until they found the people in the basement. They took them out of the basement, and we looked on from the window. People were lined up and then Paul later told me that luckily a man from Omakaitse, an Estonian, had gone past them and recognized Paul and asked:
>
> "What are you doing here?"
>
> "I was told to stand here."
>
> "Come away, quickly!"
>
> And the man went to the Germans and told them who Keres was and assured them that he was innocent. He managed to get Keres away from them, but everyone else stayed and they were all mown down with machine gun fire. Yes, they were shot, the bodies were then covered with petrol and burned, so that only a heap of ash remained.

Given such a close encounter with the horrors of war, it became clear that a German victory meant that the 'Soviet citizen' label Keres had acquired was one he swiftly needed to abandon if he wished to survive.

Becoming a family man meant that Keres inevitably had to continue his chess activities, no longer only out of individual ambition, but simply out of the need to provide for his family. After all, he had no other way to put food on the table. He was able to get his main income by providing annotations and chess analysis to various chess publications as well as chess columns in local newspapers. He even tried a hand at composing crossword puzzles.

Maria Keres:

> How did we live? We were still young and Paul was an optimist by nature. It was all right! At that time we were helped by our connections with the country folk. We didn't exactly have them, but we always managed to put something on the table. Down at the basement, there was a shop, with a spirited old man who even organized us some meat and cream... Paul also got some things from somewhere. Then came the trips abroad...

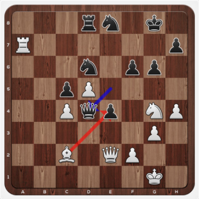
Tournaments in the Third Reich

Lacking tournament experience was as frustrating a side-effect of the war as the quality of the tournaments themselves. As Heuer put it, "Most of the tournaments were insignificant, most of his opponents, weak." He quotes Keres:

> The strength of my play diminished. My games lacked freshness, ideas and my technique became very shoddy.

Keres participated in nine tournaments and one match during the German occupation from 1941-1944. The first tournament outside of occupied Estonia took him to Salzburg, where Alekhine, Schmidt and Bogoljubov awaited him. With a round to go, Alekhine was in the lead by half a point, but faced the trailing Keres in the last round. Only a win would have sufficed for Keres - a draw or a loss would have left him second - so he played a game with Black that he later characterized as interesting, but "...due to its gambling nature it would rather seem like a coffeehouse game, as opposed to a final game of a strong tournament."

- *Alekhine 1-0 Keres, 1941*



Alekhine played **36.Bxe4!**, exploiting the fact the knight needs to be on d6 to protect against Nh6+ and Nf7+, winning the rook on d8. Alekhine went on to take first place (7.5/10) with Keres second (6/10). This was to be the cliché of 1941-44.

Munich 1942. Heuer:

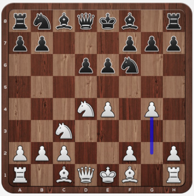
> Keres wrote to Postimees that due to the bombings of the city, he was only able to get to sleep at around 4-5 am, with games starting at 9 am.

Once again, the tournament was decided in the game Alekhine - Keres, with Alekhine defeating Keres once more. Alekhine first (8.5/11), Keres second (7.5/11).

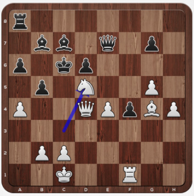
Estonian Championship 1942. Keres wins all his games.

Prague 1943. Alekhine dominated the field of 20 players (who apart from Keres, himself and Sämisch were locals) with 17/19, while Keres took second (14.5/19).

Salzburg 1943. Keres noted that it was here where he was able to play his best war-time games. This tournament is of interest in terms of openings, for his game against Bogoljubov was the birthplace of the Keres Attack in the Scheveningen Sicilian. It is noteworthy that Keres had not gone down the road of Marshall, who in devising the Marshall Attack and unleashing it upon Capablanca had analysed it deeply before essaying it in the game. Keres, on the contrary, admits that he got this idea during the game and simply went for it. And, unlike Capablanca, Bogoljubov went down in a truly *Keresian game*.



The debut of the Keres Attack...



...ended with a mating net in the middle of the board!

Keres went on to draw with Alekhine in both of their encounters and won at least one game against everyone below him. 7.5/11 saw him share first place with Alekhine.

Paul Keres in 1943 | photo: ESM F 203:463/B 1834, *Estonian Sports Museum*

Estonian Championship 1943. Reversing his initial decision to refrain from the championship, Keres decided to participate, but apparently placed little significance on this event. Jüri Randviir remembers:

> I became a 'colleague' of his in the 1943 Championship. *(...)* But something else was surprising for me, namely his casual approach to the tournament. He was often late for his games, abandoned his tennis racket with an apparent reluctance and sat behind the table with a fed-up look. As a result, he lost to Harry Kord and drew with Aleksander Arulaid, Feliks Kibbermann, Leho Laurine and Heldur Soonurm, saving lost positions against the latter two. However, he was still able to win the tournament by half a point ahead of Arulaid and Renter.
>
> It took me years to understand that his thoughts were on completely different and more significant battles of the time. This was the last time I was able to witness him showing a carefree attitude towards chess.

His mind was indeed elsewhere, for another noteworthy occurrence during the war was Alekhine's attempt to challenge Keres for a World Championship match. With Botvinnik out of the picture, Keres was the only realistic contender to Alekhine, since he happened to be on the right side of the border for organizing such a match. But in these circumstances context is everything, and as Spassky later rightly remarked:

> I know from experience that in order to reach the very top, one has to tune oneself to the narrow tunes of the goal, one has to forget everything else in the world, cast aside everything 'redundant' - or you will fail. How could Keres ever have been able to forget 'everything'?

The ambition to become World Champion and forget everything else for that end was simply not a realistic option for Keres at this point. Opočensky remembers:

> We went over this topic on numerous occasions during our long walks along the Salzach riverside. Keres:
>
> "What can Alekhine grant me? What kind of importance would such a contest even have? If I won the match I'd gain a bunch of worthless German marks. *(...)* Would it even be a match for the World Championship title? It would be a match to become champion of a certain part of the world, that occupied by the German army... If I lost the match, though, I would forever lose the chance to compete for the title following the inevitable end of the war, and would likely lose my right to seize the World Championship title."

This is how Keres, for the second time already - though on this occasion for his own reasons - lost the chance to become World Champion. Vain ambition was kept at bay and it was the same sober objectivity that led him to reject the World Championship match which was able to keep him alive throughout the war and beyond. For unlike Alekhine, Keres preferred silence to making political comments. His only notable public appearance was an interview he gave to a Nazi newspaper during the occupation, which had then been used for anti-Soviet propaganda. Alekhine, meanwhile, had a different interpretation of his refusal to play: “They’re all waiting until I turn sixty...”

The Return of the Soviets

Keres had often spent time with Alekhine during his participation in the German-organised tournaments. In his letters to friends, Keres started referring to Alekhine as 'Aljoška' and it is clear that the relationship between the aging genius and the young talent was friendly. In one of their conversations he asked Alekhine: "Do you think the Bolsheviks would dispose of me if I fell into their hands?" and Alekhine, known for his anti-Soviet views, was quick to respond, "You shouldn't even have any doubt that they'd shorten you by a head."

1944. The result of the war had become predictable and choosing the right side was now rendered easier. Keres travelled to Scandinavia but played rather weakly in Finland and Sweden, likely side-tracked by attempting to figure out how to emigrate to the West. For when he headed back home, he had a clear plan in his mind: 'to flee to Sweden'. The Nazi retreat and evacuation from the Estonian territories created a state of vacuum which many used to flee the country. Up to 80,000 Estonians exploited that vacuum and became refugees after escaping either to Finland or Sweden via sea. Keres was among those who attempted to flee with his family, for his fate in the Soviet Union seemed uncertain, to put it mildly. Why was that the case?

Being a talented chess player seemed to be of no ideological value once you endorsed politically unacceptable views. An example of the potential consequences of asserting such views was set by a stalwart of Latvian chess, Vladimirs Petrovs. While already a Soviet citizen, he publicly criticized the regime on the subject of decreasing living standards in Latvia following the establishment of Soviet rule. Inadvertently he found himself walking in the deep snow of a corrective labour camp, where he eventually perished in 1943. Keres was shrewd enough to avoid public criticism, but following the Nazi occupation it became apparent that he was not by any stretch of the imagination made of exemplary Soviet citizen material.

Vladimirs Petrovs and Keres in happier times in 1938 | photo: A. Kalm, Estonian National Archives

The Soviet authorities were well aware of his participation in German-organized tournaments and friendship with the vocal anti-Soviet Alekhine, but that was far from all. Keres was suspected not only of nationalist sympathies, but of nationalist activities. This was due to his friendship, cohabitation and willing collaboration with his dissident friends. KGB interrogation documents reveal that Keres was observed to have been a close friend of Leo Talgre, a spy and an active member of the Estonian underground nationalist movement. Talgre died in December 1944 as a result of a failed attempt to avoid capture by the NKVD. He was subsequently portrayed as a bandit and a murderer by Soviet propaganda. Keres is repeatedly mentioned in the KGB interrogation documents in relation to Talgre and presented as supportive of Talgre and aware and likely supportive of his dissident activities.

Keres’ attempts to flee to Sweden came at the last minute. He had agreed to wait with others for a boat to arrive at the coast near Haapsalu. The group of other people waiting for the day that never came included such prominent figures as the writer Friedebert Tuglas and members of the pre-war government. But, as Maria Keres recalls:

> Our travels did not work out, the big motorboats were simply too afraid to come back already. I was quite content, here was my home. What happened next, I was not able to foresee. We stayed at Tallinn, in the flat where we had so often stayed before: at my school friend's flat on Tehnika Street.

Keres was thus forced to await his fate during the advance of the Red Army's liberation campaign. The Soviets quickly re-occupied Estonia in September 1944 and the West subsequently agreed to grant Stalin the Baltics in the Yalta Pact. Stuck in what was to become the Estonian Socialist Republic, the fate of Keres remained unclear. After all, allegations against him were far more serious than 'mere criticism' of the regime, as had been the case with Petrovs. The pre-war government members he had been waiting for the boat with immediately found themselves on a trip of a quite different nature: on a train to Siberia. So in the context of Stalin's Soviet Union, 25+5 years seemed like the minimum Keres could expect, as revealed by those immediately assigned to his case. That begs the question: how was Keres able to avoid the fate of Petrovs?

Firstly, one has to note that Petrovs' fate was largely caused by the fact that his statements were made publicly and during a state of war - a time when almost every state indulges in varying degrees of censorship and reacts very acutely to any anti-regime protests. While the actions of Keres were far more serious and dissident in nature than those of Petrovs, they remained largely unknown to the general public and thus one can argue that it made it more difficult for the regime to make a clear example out of him. Due to Keres' vast popularity in Estonia there was less to be gained, and more to be lost, from taking such action.

Secondly, while Petrovs was a player of significant class, he was nowhere near as good as Keres, who had become one of the best players in the world in the interwar period. His right to challenge the reigning World Champion was widely known. Despite this, it was clear that the Soviet regime would be unlikely to take no action at all.

Suspicions that arose as a result of the interrogations of his friends and acquaintances led to Keres being summoned to the NKVD offices for interrogation on several occasions. That resulted in Keres being forced to agree to publicly renounce all his earlier incompatible statements and openly praise the Soviet regime. Despite this, he was stripped of the “Soviet Grandmaster” title and forbidden to take part in chess tournaments for the time being. Flohr remembers:

> During the XIII Champions Tournament of 1944 I felt that I missed Keres and I was worried about him. I felt that everything was not well with him. I wasn't mistaken. There was no objective information available anywhere back then and one could only wonder what was happening. There were only the reports of the Information Bureau. However, there was no lack of rumours. Even Botvinnik told me: “It seems that your Keres was fawning with the anti-Semite and anti-Soviet Alekhine. They were hand in glove.”
>
> I was stunned - 'YOUR' Keres. Hearing this from Botvinnik himself seemed ominous to me.

While the situation might have looked like the beginning of the end, it soon became apparent that simply 'going by the book', as initially hinted at by those involved, was not going to cut it.

There was simply too little support at a political level, since Keres had 'guardian angels' amongst the top Estonian communists, the most important of whom was the First Secretary of the Estonian Central Committee, Nikolai Karotamm. Maria Keres believes that it was the protection from Karotamm which ensured that Keres was able to avoid the worst possible fate, but the ultimate decision with regard to Keres was not to be taken by the Estonians. Paavo Kivine:

> And then a decision was made - the kind that is not put on paper. The decision was delivered orally to Keres, one of the leaders of the chess world, by a general! A high-level messenger for a high-level decision.

Indeed, following a series of interrogations Keres received a visit from a Security Services general from Moscow. This does suggest that a decision had been reached at the highest of levels, for why else would a general be delivering a decision regarding a chess master? The content of the meeting “was never revealed by Keres or the opposite side.”

It's here that certainty ends and speculation and the circumstantial nature of the evidence block the path to definitive answers. The content of the meeting with the general may never fully be known, since it remained undocumented. Even Keres' wife remained in the dark since Keres never discussed the visit with her. All that we can make at this point are elaborate guesses. Some believe that most of what followed was clearly a result of Soviet coercion. Some believe it was caused by Keres' own character. A separate article is necessary to address this, but the secrecy surrounding this particular meeting should be telling enough.

What we definitely know is that Keres received no substantial public punishment and remained free (in the sense of not being detained), but at what cost? Merely the fulfilment of an ideological ritual? Praise of the Soviets? While he was at first forbidden from taking part in chess tournaments abroad, even that obstacle proved temporary and was lifted later on. Fine:

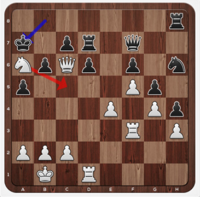
> After the Baltics were incorporated into the Soviet Union, Keres became a Soviet citizen. It is, however, not a secret that he was a known anti-communist. *(...)* We met once again in Moscow in 1946, when he came to my hotel room (something the other Soviet players dared not do) and criticized the regime mercilessly. It is beyond doubt that his political views were the reason why he was not allowed abroad, or if he was, every step he took had already been accounted for.

It is thus clear that his public praise of the Soviets was merely a forced ideological ritual rather than a sincere gesture, but to imagine that the Soviets had let him off the how is either delusional or deeply mistaken, for this is not how 'criminals' were handled in the Soviet Union. The nature of the real punishment was still to present itself, and when it did it took the crudest of forms for an aspirant to the World Championship crown.

Rehabilitation

Before we can discuss the consequences of his past on his play, let's first look at how the related events unfolded, to provide a context for the upcoming discussion. Immediately after the re-establishment of Soviet rule, Keres was appointed an instructor at the 'Kalev' Aquapark, acquiring food stamps in return for work. He was soon 'promoted' and became an instructor of a chess club instead. Keres took the work seriously and helped organize the life of the club as well as the tournaments it organized, such as the Estonian Open Championship of 1945. Keres won that tournament with 13/16 ahead of Kotov, Flohr, Liliental and Mikenas.

While Keres stayed at home, Botvinnik finally managed to agree upon a match with Alekhine. After this, Keres was allowed abroad for the first time - to the Georgian Open Championship - where after 19 rounds Mikenas could only shake his head in disillusionment. His 17.5/19 proved insufficient to win, since Keres scored a near perfect 18/19. It certainly didn't help that Mikenas had *lost their individual encounter*:



29.Nc5! was an elegant way to finish off the attack - 29...bxc5 30.Ra3 would soon be mate.

Keres' 'worst' results of the tournament were draws with popular Georgian chess coach Archil Ebralidze and a 16-year old Tigran Petrosian, for whom the meeting with Keres was his first contact with and success against a strong grandmaster.

It was in Georgia that Keres learned of Alekhine's death, the first time a reigning World Chess Champion had died. No process for finding a new champion in such circumstances was in place, and Keres once again became useful to the Soviets, since the world's chess journalists presented him as one of the clear contenders for the title. Keres was thus rehabilitated step-by-step and was allowed to play on second board in the USSR - Great Britain radio match, scoring 1.5/2 against Klein, while Botvinnik lost a game to Alexander, scoring 1/2. The USSR triumphed with an overall score of 14-6.

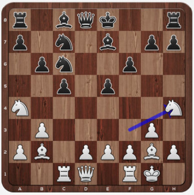
Keres gave a 40-board simul in 1946 to sailors on the "October Revolution", which was docked in Tallinn | photo: Grigori Akmolinski, AM N 33716:8, *Estonian Sports Museum*

Despite these successes, Keres' past rendered his participation in tournaments held in the West impossible for the time being. It is for this reason that he was forbidden to participate in the prestigious Groningen supertournament of 1946, despite receiving an individual invitation from the Dutch organizers. Heuer:

> When the Soviet delegation headed to Groningen, Keres sat in Tallinn. On the day the names of players eligible for the trip were announced in the paper, Keres was in the chess club. He looked around quietly for about half an hour and then left without uttering a single word.

After winning in Groningen, Botvinnik made it clear that he was the strongest contestant for the now vacant World Champion's throne. Keres meanwhile sought to assert his fading rights to the throne as well and perhaps his only chance to effectively do so in these circumstances was the Soviet Championship of 1947. Botvinnik took the cunning decision to avoid participation, but the field remained strong, as was the case in any Soviet Championship: Smyslov, Bronstein, Liliental, Ragozin, Tolush, Flohr, Bondarevsky were just a few of those taking part.

Keres played in his usual style and despite leading after seven rounds he then sacrificed an exchange against outsider Klaman in Round 8. Klaman accepted the gift and went on to punish Keres for his recklessness, doing so in style. However, Klaman was the only one to steal a full point from Keres, as the rest of the field had to be happy if they were able to draw the Estonian. Some notable games from the tournament include *Keres 1-0 Smyslov, 1947*...



Are knights on the rim dim? Keres doesn't think so!

...and *Goldenov 0-1 Keres, 1947*. Keres won a total of 10 games (+10 =8 -1) and his 14/19 made him the new Soviet Champion. Heuer:

> Fame is miscellaneous: there is the loud one-day fame of a boxing champion; the fame of admiration for a ballerina in the theatre spotlights; and the physicist's unaccountable fame stuck in a quiet laboratory somewhere. But some names bring the special recognition of admiration to everyone's face. Already in 1938, Salo Flohr had claimed that 'at home, Keres is a true national hero' and in March 1947 this was truer than ever before.

Indeed, by that time Keres had become a national hero in Estonia, but despite winning the Soviet Championship he remained second behind Botvinnik in the context of the Soviet Union. After Keres won yet another strong 1947 tournament in Pärnu with 9.5/13 ahead of Kotov, Liliental, Flohr, Smyslov and Bronstein, the two rivals were finally set to meet in Moscow in 1947.

1947 Chigorin Memorial

> No, I will participate. So far I have lost only one game against Botvinnik, and I will need retribution before the start of the World Championship.

This was the response Keres gave to his friend Jüri Rebane after the latter had advised Keres to avoid participation in the 'Pan-Slav' event which saw the greatest Soviet players face the strongest of Eastern Europe in a 16-player round-robin held in Moscow. As we can see, Keres knew very well that the main stage was set for the duel between himself and Botvinnik.

He started off by employing the Keres Attack against Plater, but to no avail, as Plater was able to resist the attacks and the game petered out to a draw. Keres then won three games in a row against Tsvetkov, Sokolsky and Kholmov, then drew with Smyslov in Round five and lost to Ragozin in the next round. Keres then followed up with 5.5/7 in the following rounds, adding up to a total of 9/13. With two rounds to go he was thus right on the heels of Botvinnik (9.5/13) and they were set to meet in the penultimate round. Botvinnik came into the game after having just lost to the Czechoslovak Pachman in the previous round, while Keres had held a draw as Black against Gligorić.

ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР
КЕРЕС П.П.
ГРОССМЕЙСТЕР СССР
БОТВИННИК М.М.

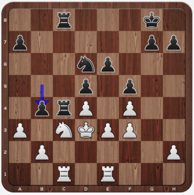
The deciding game of the 1947 Chigorin Memorial and the first time Keres and Botvinnik had met in 6 years | photo: Estonian National Archives

This was the first time since the 1941 Absolute Championship that Botvinnik and Keres sat down at the same board. Keres needed a win in order to have any chance of winning the tournament. Botvinnik, meanwhile, refused to take the advice of Flohr, whose style dictated his suggestion to draw with Keres and try to win in the last round against the weaker Trifunović. Despite playing Black, Botvinnik had other ideas. His considerations and plans showed him for the psychological warrior he was:

> For first place in the Chigorin Memorial a draw was probably good enough for me, whereas Keres had to go for a win. This was a handy situation. I had to aim for a prolonged positional closed struggle in which I could slowly hope for slips by my opponent, slips that are inevitable when one has to look for a win when it isn't there. *(...)*
>
> As a player, Keres had failings which were well-known to me. The first was his slight uncertainty when he had to orientate himself in the opening schemes. He preferred, on the whole, obsolete opening systems. That was why he had a taste for open play. His second failing, a psychological one, was a tendency to fade somewhat at decisive moments in the struggle, while when his mood was spoiled he played below his capabilities. I decided that with the help of this game to rob my main rival in the forthcoming event *(the World Championship tournament)* of his confidence.

- *Keres 0-1 Botvinnik, 1947*

While both players were aiming for a win, Botvinnik calculated correctly that Keres would eventually be the cause of his own undoing. After being unable to break Botvinnik's Stonewall Dutch and drifting in the middlegame, Keres was forced to put up tough resistance for about 80 moves, but eventually resigned.



After 32...b4! the writing was on the wall for Keres

Botvinnik's plan to inflict a substantial blow on the confidence of Keres was a clear success, for Keres was deeply disturbed by this loss. Maria Keres:

> I recall that during the Chigorin tournament of 1947, when he lost a game to Botvinnik, he was very agitated - he could barely sleep that night...

It's clear he failed to pull himself together following this defeat and he went on to lose the last round game as well. Spassky explained

> Being a descendant of Western culture, Keres was more a creative than a destructive spirit. It is not inconceivable that his collision with the methods of Botvinnik traumatized him for a long while.

Maria Keres seconds such an opinion by stating:

> He was most of all upset with people who were full of themselves, people who made it apparent that they thought they were superior to others.

And Botvinnik, in the context of the Soviet Union, was clearly such a character. Botvinnik claimed a dominant tournament victory with 11/15 while the back-to-back losses in the last two rounds dropped Keres to 6th place. In the context of the upcoming World Championship tournament, this result made Botvinnik the odds-on favourite, while Keres was left licking his wounds as he tried to recover.

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.

See also:

- *Paul Keres I: Prince without a Crown (1916-36)*
- *Paul Keres II: A new chess superstar (1936-37)*
- *Paul Keres III: Avro 1938: Rightful challenger*

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Post

JuriEintalu

Jan 16, 2017 | 23:25

1948(2)

There is a theatre play about Paul Keres:

Kõiv, Madis (2015)

Keskmängustrateegia.

Tallinn: Eesti Draamateater.

In English, the name of the play is

"Middle-Game Strategy"

Madis Kõiv, the author of the play, was a theoretical physicist and a writer, well-known in Estonia. He was highly acquainted with the history and life of Paul Keres, because Paul`s brother Harald Keres was a theoretical physicist. Intellectual abilities and knowledge of Madis Koiv are beyond doubt.

In this play, the KGB major declares that **Paul Keres was a spy of Estonian government.** The task of Paul Keres was to negotiate with Sweden authorities hidden from Nazi-German authorities. And the KGB major forces Paul Keres to go on with being a spy:

"You are making the same job, the government is other." (not exact translation).

Again, Kõiv`s hypothesis is a plausible explanation of some facts we know and one should not exclude such an explanation on *a priori* grounds.

Among other things, some facts presented in the present, in my mind brilliant essay, are just rumors. Kõiv`s hypothesis is not the worst of this kind of speculations.

1944 is obscure. There are many things we do not know.