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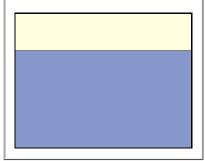
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We now present the second and final installment of the interview with Russian grandmaster Yuri Averbakh. The first part may be found in the **ChessCafe.com Archives**: <u>www.chesscafe.com/text/skittles181.pdf</u>.

Yuri Averbakh: An Interview with History

Part 2

by Taylor Kingston

Taylor Kingston: OK, let's switch gears for a while; we've been talking about the past, let's shift to the present. You have been playing in and surveying the chess scene for many decades. I was wondering what are your feelings and opinions about the current world chess situation: about FIDE, the divided world championship, and so forth.

Yuri Averbakh: First of all, I would like to say that I am gratified that today they reached agreement to try to reunify the world championship. You know about this?

TK: No, is this some recent news?

YA: In Prague, I believe, there was a meeting of Kramnik, Kasparov, Ilyumzhinov, and others. They held this meeting because they had a sponsor, someone from the Emirates or some other Arab country, which offered a lot of money for a world championship. And they decided there will be a tournament in Dortmund, Germany, and the winner of this tournament will play a match with Kramnik.

TK: And this tournament will include, say, Ponomariov ...

YA: No, Ponomariov, because he is currently champion of

FIDE, will next year play a match against Kasparov, and the winners of these two matches will play a match for the world title. This is a new solution, and I think if it is carried out, it will solve a lot of problems.

TK: And they are getting people like Anand involved ...

YA: I believe Anand, and also Michael Adams and Ivanchuk. Anyway, if they choose to play in Dortmund, they will have the chance to qualify.

TK: It sounds something like AVRO 1938.

YA: Yes, a similar situation. I think this is a very important solution, that may solve a lot of problems in chess.

TK: I was wondering what you thought of the way FIDE has been speeding up time controls in its tournaments.

YA: Well, I believe when they work out the rules for this tournament, and these matches, they will choose a better time limit. At least I hope so. Anyway, it is a step forward.

TK: I gather you do not like the current situation where we have two or even three "world champions"?

YA: No, it's a ridiculous situation.

TK. You prefer the old days where there was definitely one. Returning to those older days, let me ask about the past again. You knew Botvinnik very well, for example playing training games with him ... **YA:** Yes, I played with him about 20 or 25 training games, starting in 1955 until 1958.

TK: In your acquaintance with Botvinnik, did you ever get the impression that he had used his political influence to thwart or hinder his serious rivals, such as Keres or Bronstein?



YA: No, I don't think so. Botvinnik had

a very strong supporter, the minister of electricity in our country, Zhemarin was his name. I believe Botvinnik had studied with him in his youth. Zhemarin worked to help Botvinnik, not on the chessboard, but sometimes to improve his economic situation, help him get better housing, that kind of thing.

TK: I believe that some time around 1954, Botvinnik wrote a political article. It had to do with the subject of fomenting socialist revolution in western countries.

YA: Yes, this story was published in our historical magazine a number of years ago [*It appeared in* Istorichesky Archiv, #2/1993, pp. 58-67]. I read it.

TK: Ah, good. And if I understand correctly, the position Botvinnik espoused was not what the Politburo wanted to hear ...

YA: What he wrote was a letter to the chief editor of *Pravda*, who was a member of the Politburo. And you know, this incident points out a main problem with Botvinnik; I wrote about it in my memoirs. Botvinnik thought he was champion in everything: chess, politics, economics, and including, by the way, computers. Because you know, for 30 years he worked in the wrong direction in computers.

TK: Yes, he tried to develop a chess "artificial intelligence."

YA: Yes, and the main point is that we don't know what we

ourselves think, and Botvinnik wanted to make a machine that works like our brain. But he did not know how our brain works.

TK: You are saying that Botvinnik got a "swelled head," he got too high an opinion of himself?

YA: Oh, he began to think that he was able to do everything. You know, I had a talk with him about this problem, the problem of a chess-playing computer, because I was also an engineer. I also got a proposal to start work on a chess computer, but after some thought, I refused to do such work, because I felt I was too old to start. It is work for the young generation, people who know much more mathematics than Botvinnik and I. This is my point. But because Botvinnik believed he could do anything, he agreed to do these things. And it was the same with economics. You know, in the 1990s, before he died, he wrote also a big thesis about how to transform our economy. I learned this from a man who was the Minister of Economics of our country, and he wrote a negative reply to Botvinnik's proposal.

And it was just the same with his letter to *Pravda*. Botvinnik had his own political ideas, that it was possible to transform the world toward communism without a third world war.

TK: Yes, that is what he wrote in 1954, right?

YA: Yes, but the answer from the political secretariat was to the following effect: It is necessary to invite Botvinnik and explain to him his mistakes, and if he still insists on his own opinion, he can no longer be a member of the Communist Party. And then Botvinnik wrote a letter saying "Thank you very much for pointing out my mistakes," and he dropped the subject. He took a step back.

TK: And so was he then no longer in political favor after that?

YA: No, I don't think it was closely connected to that. This was in 1954. In 1956 he instigated a new rule change. In 1956, after his match with Bronstein *[in 1951]*, and after his match

with Smyslov [*in 1954*], he got the possibility of playing a rematch. Why? He could not win the first match, nor the second. In 1956, the Olympiad was held in Moscow, and our federation was represented in FIDE by Ragozin, who was a personal friend of Botvinnik, and by Mr. Abramov, chief of the chess department of the sport committee, and also a friend of Botvinnik. And in 1956, before Botvinnik began his second match with Smyslov, FIDE gave him the right to a return match. It was completely unfair.

TK: I thought the rematch rule had been on the FIDE books since ...

YA: No, no, no. What had been in the FIDE rules was this: in the event the champion lost the match, they could organize a triangular match-tournament, with the old champion, the new champion, and a new challenger. But not a return match. In the initial proposals to FIDE by Botvinnik, there was nothing about a return match. You can see it, written in black and white.

TK: So what prompted FIDE to give him that right?

YA: I will explain. Folke Rogard, who was then president of FIDE, was trying to be extremely neutral between West and East. For instance, when our federation asked that Tal, after winning the Soviet championship, be given the title of grandmaster, he immediately gave also the grandmaster title to the champion of the USA, Bisguier. Just to make things even. Anyway, Rogard felt at that time that because we had so many strong grandmasters, the question of a rematch was a question for our federation.

What finally happened, was that in the same FIDE congress that gave Botvinnik the right to a rematch, there was also a decision about the maximum number of players from one country who could be admitted to the Candidates Tournament. And really, you know, in chess we have an expression "a double blow": on one hand Botvinnik got the benefit of a return match, and on the other the decision about the number of candidates was a blow against his opponents from our country! **TK:** Yes, because it limited the number he had to prepare for. This is a point Bronstein made in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

YA: Bronstein suffered from it, as did Leonid Stein. He twice suffered from this. He twice qualified, but it came to nothing. By the way, both Bronstein and I suffered from it at the Portoroz tournament *[the 1958 Interzonal]*, because to qualify we had to have at least 1½ points more than any foreign master. Because at that time we had four Russians: Tal, Petrosian, Bronstein and myself, and from the start only two of us could qualify, because Keres and Smyslov had already the right to play in the Candidates Tournament. And so this decision really worked against us.

TK: And you feel that Botvinnik was behind this, had deliberately engineered it?

YA: I believe so. Or at least, his friends organized it for him. But because I know Botvinnik, I believe he organized it himself.

TK: Some people wonder whether Botvinnik was just a passive recipient of favor, or was in fact an active instigator of some things.



Isaac Kashdan, Mrs G. Piatigorsky, Y. Averbakh (Los Angeles, 1968).

YA: Let me tell you the story of his return match with Tal *[in 1961]*. Tal was ill before the match, and doctors in Riga gave

certification that he was unfit to start the match, and they asked for a postponement of two months. When Botvinnik heard this, he said "Let Tal come to Moscow, and let our doctors check him. If our doctors certify him, then I will agree to postpone." And Tal said, "Well, I'll win in any case," and that was a decided mistake on his part.

TK: So you think in this case Botvinnik was using his connections, I think the Russian word is *sviazi*?

YA: Yes, he knew how to use his connections. And another interesting thing, after the Portoroz tournament, Bronstein, Petrosian and I wrote a letter to our federation, saying that this rule is unfair for our grandmasters. It is necessary to repeal it. And Botvinnik was the first to attack us for this letter, in a meeting of our federation. He said, "These weak grandmasters are trying to spoil the system which elevated myself on behalf of our country. And if any brick is removed from this edifice I have built, the whole system will be destroyed."

TK: Very grandiose rhetoric. Over here we call that "wrapping yourself in the flag."

YA: Yes, yes (laughs). And the federation voted against our proposal.

TK: We discussed the new developments in the world championship. Prior to that, what was your opinion of the direction Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was taking FIDE?

YA: You know, there exists, shall we say, an Eastern way of thinking, an Eastern type of mind. It started with Campomanes, this typical authoritarian way of leading, and, I am sorry to say, Ilyumzhinov is not an exception. And it is a major weakness of FIDE that it is made up of many weak countries, but each country has one vote. It is very easy to organize all these small countries to fight any big country. I spent in FIDE about 15 years: I was a delegate to FIDE, I was a member of its central committee, I was the chairman of its qualification commission, I was its chairman for developing countries. And I know how

completely different the situation was before, when Olafsson was president, or especially when Euwe was president. Most of the positions in FIDE now are taken by people from eastern countries, and they support any decision made by Ilyumzhinov.

TK: So you preferred the way it was under Euwe and Olafsson?

YA: In the time of Euwe it was not always, shall we say, quiet in FIDE, but Euwe always worked to find compromise. He wanted to have, let's say, equilibrium, but that is not the case in the time of Campomanes or Ilyumzhinov.

TK: You feel that way, even though some of Euwe's decisions were not what the Soviet Federation wanted?

YA: Yes, of course. When he first became president Euwe took, as his main task, to give Fischer a chance to play for the world championship. It was his main idea, because there had been too many Russians, you know. He wanted strongly to give Fischer the chance for a world championship match. But then, after Fischer got the title, Euwe was extremely neutral. I saw this, because I started to work in FIDE in 1974; I was elected at the congress in Nice.

TK: So after that, you felt he was fair and impartial?

YA: I believe so. I saw it in him, because there was an extraordinary congress then, where Edmondson wanted so badly to save the Fischer-Karpov match. Euwe was strictly neutral, strictly. And by the way, he was attacked from both sides for it.

TK: Not unusual for a man in that position.

A new thought occurs to me; let us shift back to the past again. I have a friend with an obsession on a certain subject, and he will not forgive me if I fail to ask you about it: Curaçao 1962.

YA: Yes, I was there. I was the chief of the USSR delegation.

TK: Very good. A lot of people think there was collusion there between Petrosian, Keres, and Geller, to make easy draws amongst themselves, while trying hard against Fischer.

YA: Fischer is not objective on this situation. Let us see the situation the way it was. Keres was the oldest participant in this competition. The tournament was 28 rounds, I believe, about two months long, and Keres naturally wanted to save his strength for the end of the tournament. Petrosian and Geller were friends, very close friends. If you look at the games they played in any competition, including Candidates Tournaments, every time, they made a draw. [*This is neither literally true nor completely wrong. Before 1962, the Petrosian-Geller score stood at* +3 -4 =15. However in their previous Candidates competition, Amsterdam 1956, their two games had decisive results, each winning one. Keres' pre-1962 score was +6 -3 =8 against Geller, and +3 -3 =14 against Petrosian.]

So we have Petrosian and Geller, these two old friends, and Keres, for practical reasons, decided why not make draws with them, since then he saves his strength for the last part of the tournament. Then, what really happened in the last part of the tournament? Keres lost to Benko, when before he had a score of 7-0 against him [Actually +7 –0 =4 to that point]. But the law of averages was against him, because Benko was not such a bad player that he should lose 100% of his games to Keres. The second thing was, in the last round Keres, to win the tournament, had to beat Fischer. The oldest player needed to beat the youngest, a nearly impossible situation, of course he couldn't win at that stage.

This explains the psychological situation. And it was not against Fischer; Keres just wanted to conserve his strength.

TK: So in your opinion, it was Keres' idea as much as anyone else's?

YA: No, of course not. Keres could never propose such a thing. No, it could be proposed by Petrosian.

TK: OK, that accords with the reports I have read, that it was the idea of Petrosian, or even of his wife.

YA: Maybe. In our newspapers, when the last part of the tournament started, some journalist wrote "Any man who can win a game now will win the tournament." But I could see that the players were so tired, that the tournament would be won by whoever could just make draws in all his games. And that was Petrosian.

Another thing. The main favorites going into this tournament were Tal and Fischer. But Tal, before the tournament, had a very serious operation, he lost one kidney. And so he could not be a serious competitor. He had to withdraw. And by the way, I made that decision, I'm sorry to say. He wanted to keep playing, from a bed. But I called Rogard, president of FIDE, and I called Moscow, our federation, and all recommended that Tal leave the tournament. Even from a bed, Tal could beat almost anybody, but it was best for him to withdraw. We even discussed sending him to the United States for medical treatment.

TK: Some have thought that the Keres/Petrosian/Geller agreement at Curaçao worked against Keres, because he was maybe just a little better than the other two at that time.

YA: No, the main point was "Who would be less tired?". And a second point: if Fischer or Tal had played better, these draws would have worked in their favor. But Fischer started with two losses: he lost to Benko, and in the second round to Geller. And after that, the situation was such that it was not necessary to win as much. The draws worked only because Fischer and Tal were in bad form.

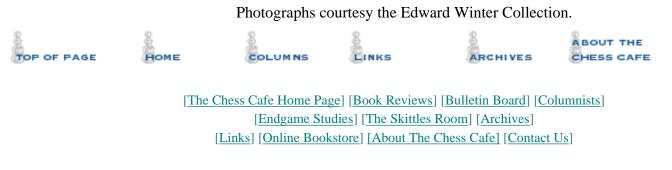
TK: Shifting forward some years, do you have any comment on the Karpov-Korchnoi matches. There have been many stories, about threats against Korchnoi, machinations behind the scenes, that sort of thing. Do you have any comment on that? **YA:** You know, I think that was the ugliest match I have ever seen. I was lucky not to be in Baguio *[in 1978]*. In 1977, just before this match, I was replaced as president of our federation by Sevastianov, a personal friend of Karpov. But I stayed on as first vice-president, responsible for foreign affairs in FIDE.

TK: So you had very little to do with the Karpov-Korchnoi matches?

YA: Yes, I was very lucky, because it was the ugliest match in the history of chess, in many ways. Both sides seemed to be working to spoil the image of the game of chess as a king's game. Their conduct was more like boxers, insulting each other. I believe it is important to uphold the image of chess.

TK: Indeed, I would agree. Well, grandmaster, I am very grateful for your time and cooperation. I hope we talk again some day. *Spasibo* and *do svedanya*.

YA: Khorosho, do svedanya.



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