

Grandmaster Leonid Alexandrovich Shamkovich (1923-2005) Goodbye Prince

by Michael Khodarkovsky

It was just a few months ago that we spoke on the phone, and Leonid was still optimistic and passionate about his analytical work, saying that he was continuing to analyze recently played games and following all theoretical innovations being played by the top players in the world. Less than a year ago he was inducted into the Chess Hall of Fame, and he was very pleased to know that his achievements as a player and theoretician were appreciated by the chess community.

He came to the United States in 1976 by way of Israel, emigrating from the former Soviet Union because he “could not tolerate the anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union anymore.” At 51, when he decided to emigrate to Israel, many of his colleagues were surprised that he made such a bold decision. Many of them preferred to find a warm place in collaboration with Soviet authorities in order to receive comparatively decent pension plans.

ANOTHER PATH

But Leonid chose another path: He emigrated and continued playing chess, writing theoretical articles and books, and enriching chess theory for the benefit of his contemporaries and future generations. He left behind his victories in the Russian Championship in 1954 and 1957, the Moscow Championship in 1963 and six participations in the prestigious finals of the Soviet Championships along with great grandmasters such as Mikhail Tal, Leonid Stein, David Bronstein, Viktor Korchnoi, Efim Geller, and others.

Despite others’ beliefs that he was over the hill, Leonid won the Israeli championship in 1974 and the U.S. Open in 1976 and 1977, sharing first place in the latter with his former compatriot Anatoly Lein. He represented the United States in the 1979 Interzonal and was a member of the U.S. team at the 1980 Olympiad. He won many international tournaments, but he was also known as a brilliant theoretician, whose paradoxical inventions stunned his opponents and fascinated colleagues and fans. Because of his creative mind and superb analytical skills, Leonid was invited by ex-World Champion Mikhail Tal (1965) and Grandmaster Leonid Stein (1972) to assist them in the role of a coach.

Shamkovich has been considered one of the leading theoreticians during his career. He used his knowledge to fashion many new ideas. For instance, chess players for many years religiously followed advice of Alexan-

der Alekhine, not to play in the Gruenfeld Defense on move seven, (Nf3) in order to avoid being pinned by Bg4. It was Shamkovich who radically changed the direction of this theory by recommending and employing 7 Nf3 and 8 Rb1. Since then, this system’s popularity has grown as the best players in the world, including Garry Kasparov, successfully utilize this strategy in games to this day. Leonid’s tireless analytical work inspired many young players.

A REAL ARTIST

Garry Kasparov recalls being only 9 years old when he was enormously impressed by a debate between Leonid and Alexander Nikitin. He writes, “how poor the state of chess would be if the real artist, like Shamkovich, did not spend countless hours trying to connect the zenith of Tal’s genius with the true essence of chess.”

In all of his chess analysis, Shamkovich was a maximalist, looking for new approaches, methods and ideas, which have always been related to complications and risks. He appreciated games that were filled with nontrivial combinations, witty plans and sharp theoretical lines. When going over his own games, Leonid was always critical of errors and missteps, which sometimes occurred. Being so critical of himself, he was also critical but very objective about the games of other players. Many of the books and articles he wrote contained deep, thorough analysis that he did without the help of a computer chess database. Leonid was one of the last chess knights, whose precision in analysis could be compared with powerful computer engines of our time.

MASTERFUL CONTRIBUTIONS

Leonid Shamkovich desired to be remembered for the masterful analytical and theoretical contributions he made to the game of chess. Many times in our private conversations Shamkovich relayed to me his hope of being remembered as an artist, whose work benefited the chess community, a community he loved. One of his many books was *The Chess Terrorist’s Handbook*, and on countless occasions he



GM Shamkovich at home, 2005.

Photo by Fedor Khrapatin

conveyed to me his great displeasure with the title. Leonid wanted his games and his analysis to be remembered as ones made by an artist and lover of chess, and not associated with the word “terrorist.” Those who knew Leonid simply could not associate him with that word. He was a most good-hearted, kind and soft-spoken man, who was named by his colleagues and friends “The Prince” because of his politeness and good manners, like the aristocrats of the nineteenth century.

He was born on June 1, 1923 in the city of Taganrog, in the southern part of Russia, to a Jewish family. His grandfather was a prominent doctor in this region and his father was a lawyer and writer. His family was evacuated to the Republic of Georgia during WWII where he began to play chess, and after WWII ended he attended Leningrad’s Polytechnical Institute, where he studied theoretical physics. His love for chess completely turned him toward pursuing a career as a professional chess player, and he ended up dedicating his entire life to it, until April 22, 2005.

Those most close to Leonid Shamkovich pay their respects to him and say “Goodbye Friend, Goodbye Maestro, Goodbye Prince.”

As an illustration of his artistry in chess, I have selected two games, which Leonid would have loved to present himself. One of them he contributed to my book, *The Gruenfeld Defence, Revealed* and the other, he considered one of the best of his career. Both games are enriched with Leonid’s own annotations.

GRUENFELD DEFENSE

[D85]

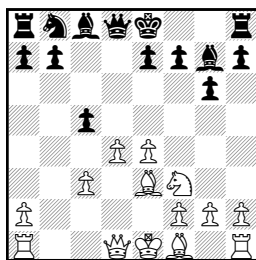
W: J. Fedorowicz

B: L. Shamkovich

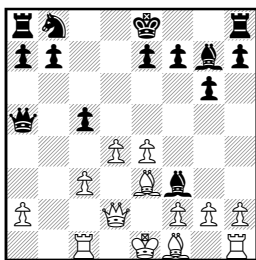
New York, 1996

1 d4 Nf6 2 Nf3 g6 3 c4 Bg7 4 Nc3 d5 5 cxd5 Nxd5 6 e4 Nxc3 7 bxc3 c5 8 Be3 (diagram)

An alternative 8 Rb1, preventing the bishop's development became more popular in recent years, but Black has sufficient resources for counterplay with 8 ... 0-0 9 Be2 Qa5. 8 ... Bg4!? Shamkovich considered that this move gives Black better chances than 8 ... 0-0, in view of the possibility like 9 Qd2 Bg4 10 Rc1 Bxf3 11 gxf3 Nc6 12 h4! The text move is played with the idea of exchanging the black bishop in order to intensify pressure on White's center. 9 Rc1 Qa5 10 Qd2 Bxf3 (diagram)

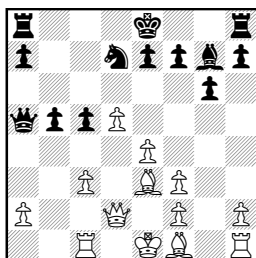


after 8 Be3



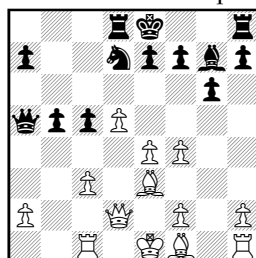
after 10 ... Bxf3

This is better than 10 ... 0-0 11 Ng5! with a better game for White, as was played by Portisch-Korchnoi, in their match, Bad Kissingen, 1983. 11 gxf3 Nd7 12 d5 b5 (diagram)



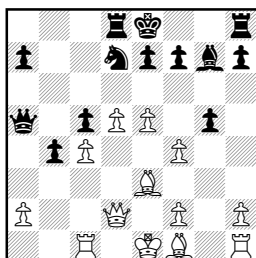
after 12 ... b5

"I originated this plan at the board, thinking of the methodical response 13 c4. Then I prepared to meet it with 13 ... b4, threatening 14 ... Bc3. My opponent rightly declined this continuation and creatively found another way to build an imposing pawn center." (L. Shamkovich) 13 f4 Rd8! (diagram)



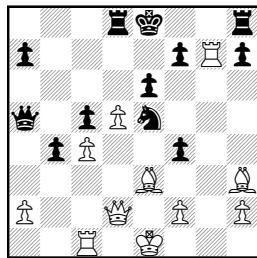
after 13 ... Rd8!

Here it is very important to play the correct order of moves. It is bad to play the standard 13 ... 0-0?, because of the immediate strong attack, starting with 14 h4! The text is aiming to x-ray the queen and attack White's center. 14 c4 b4 15 e5 White



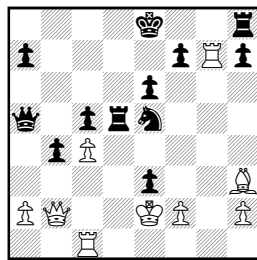
after 15 ... g5!

is trying to limit the power of the fianchetto bishop, but Black has an outstanding counter argument 15 ... g5! (previous diagram) 16 Bh3 White, in his turn, prepared to meet 16 ... gxf4 with Bxd7+! Rxd7 18 Bxf4. 16 ... e6 17 Rg1 If 17 dxe6, then 17 ... Nxe5. 17 ... gxf4 18 Rxcg7 Nxe5! (diagram)



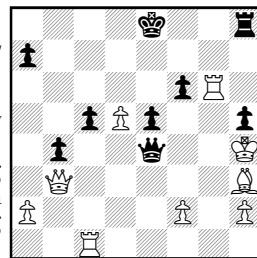
after 18 ... Nxe5

"My opponent likely calculated the following line: 18 ... fxe3 19 Qxe3 only, and then for example, 19 ... b3+ 20 Kf1 b2 21 Re1 Qb4 22 dxe6! b1Q 23 Rxb1 Qxb1+ 24 Kg2 Qb7+ 25 Kg3 with unclear game. But I surprised him with my last move. Now not only is the knight a threatening fork on 'f3', but rook on 'd8' is doing its job as well, thanks to move 13 ... Rd8." (L. Shamkovich) 19 Ke2? Correct was 19 Kf1, although after 19 ... Qa3! 20 Bxf4 Qxh3+ 21 Ke2 Qf3+ 22 Kf1 Qd3+! Black is better anyway. The text move allows Black to demonstrate an elegant but decisive tactical fireworks. 19 ... fxe3 20 Qb2 If 20 fxe3, then 20 ... Qa6! 20 ... Rxd5!! (diagram)



after 20 ... Rxd5!!

It's a real beauty! 21 cxd5 White has no choice but to accept this rook sacrifice, because if 21 Kxe3, then 21 ... Rd4!, or if 21 fxe3, then 21 ... Qa6 with Black's clear advantage. 21 ... Qa6+ 22 Kxe3 Qd3+ 23 Kf4 f6!



after 27 ... Qe4+

Such a lovely intermediate touch, staging mating net with the final bang 24 ... Qf3 mate! 24 Qb3 Ng6+ 25 Rxc6 e5+ 26 Kg4 h5+ 27 Kh4 Qe4+ (diagram) This is the grand finale: 28 Kg3 h4 mate, or if 28 Bg4 or 28 Rg4 hxg4 mates. "Pay attention to the treacherous role played by the rook on h8—until the last moves it was out of the battle." (L. Shamkovich). An absolutely brilliant game! 0-1.

SICILIAN DEFENSE

KERES ATTACK

W: L. Shamkovich

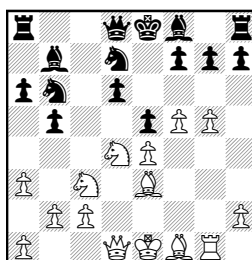
B: P. Benko

[B81]

Pasadena, 1978

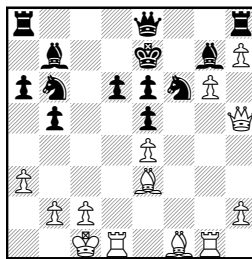
1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4

Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 d6 6 g4 a6 7 g5 Nfd7 8 Be3 b5 Black is planning 9 ... Bb7 or 9 ... b4, which is the most active continuation. 9 a3 Nb6 10 Rg1 N8d7 11 f4 Bb7 12 f5 e5 (diagram)



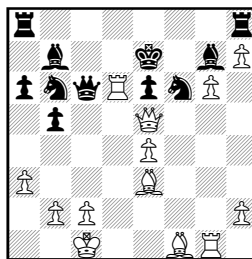
after 12 ... e5

The text position back then considered as the only theoretical line based on the assumption of Black's counterplay after 13 Nb3 Rc8. But in this game Shamkovich demonstrated an exceptionally brave and fantastic sacrifice. Later, analyzing this game for his book *Sicilian: ... e6 and ... d6 systems* Garry Kasparov wrote: "This is beautiful and complicated." 13 Ne6!! "This crude invasion of Black's camp by the knight was familiar to me from other Sicilian systems. After some thought, I decided to pull the trigger now. I wasn't sure it was an original idea, but the surprised look on Benko's face suggested that it might be." (L. Shamkovich) 13 ... fxe6 14 Qh5+ g6? Correct was 14 ... Ke7. 15 fxg6 Ke7 16 gxh7 Bg7 17 0-0-0 Qe8 18 g6 Nf6? (diagram)



after 18 ... Nf6?

"This is a blunder, although it is hard to recommend an alternative, that would change Black's fate. For example, 18 ... Rc8 19 Bg5+ Nf6 20 Bxf6+ Bxf6 21 Qh6!, and it is impossible to stop the g6-pawn since the exchange sacrifice 21 ... Rxc3 22 bxc3 Qc6 is insufficient." (L. Shamkovich) 19 Qxe5! Qc6 20 Rxd6! (diagram)



after 20 Rxd6!

The rest is just a capitalization of the achieved advantage. 20 ... Qxd6 21 Bc5 Rad8 22 Bh3 Bc8 23 Bxd6+ Rxd6 24 Qg5 e5 25 Qxe5+ Be6 26 Bxe6 Rxe6 27 Qc5+ Ke8 28 Qf5 Re7 29 Rd1 Nfd7 30 Nd5 Nxd5 31 Qxd5 Be5 32 Qc6 Kd8 33 Rd5! Rf8 34 Qa8+ and Black resigned. Immediately after the game, Benko and Lombardy grilled me. "If Black would play 14 ... Qe7! he could hold. Tell us, why did you sac the piece there?" With my limited English, the best I could reply was, "An attack against the black king." (L. Shamkovich) 1-0.