

NEWS, INFORMATION, TOURNAMENTS AND REPORTS

MIKHAIL MOISEIVICH BOTVINNIK: AN OBITUARY

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With the decease of Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik, chess has lost one of its most colourful figures. His versatility may be read off from his biography as a chess master. Born in Saint Petersburg in 1911, Botvinnik won the World Championship three times and simultaneously achieved great distinction as an electrical engineer and as a planner in energy matters. For his achievement in the latter field, he was decorated at the end of World War II. He was a many-time chess champion of the USSR and established himself on the international scene after drawing a match with Flohr in 1933.

He was unstoppable afterwards: in the AVRO tournament of 1938 he was a close third behind Fine and Keres. The war confined him to his home country, but he was victorious at Groningen, The Netherlands in 1946 and in Moscow in 1947. The world title became his in the memorable tournament The Hague / Moscow 1948. He defended his title successfully against Bronstein (1951) and Smyslov (1954), losing it to Smyslov (1957) only to regain it in 1958. Temporarily he lost the title to Tal in 1960, only to win it again the next year. As a World Champion he lost the title to Petrosian in 1963 for good, FIDE rules at that time not entitling him to a return match.

After the loss of his title, he turned his attention to the areas of computerized planning and computer chess, which, in his view, had many facets in common. He wrote several books (among which *Computers, Chess and Long-Range Planning* (1970) and *Computers in Chess: Solving Inexact Search Problems* (1984)), which sold very well and were translated into many languages on the strength of his being a former World Champion. It is of undoubted merit that he brought the computerization of chess – *in posse* if not *in esse* – to the attention of the public at large. He did so as a successful presenter of radio programmes in his native country and at many spectacular appearances in the wider world, especially in Germany and The Netherlands.

Among his many honorifics, Botvinnik was a Vice-President of the Committee for Cultural Relations between the then Soviet Union and The Netherlands. Riding this track, he visited The Netherlands often, with large attendances following him in his widely reported presentations.

The *ICCA Journal* is happy to record that when its Editor-in-Chief first visited him in his Moscow apartment in 1978, Mikhail was quick to express his sympathy for co-operation with IBM, Professor Euwe and the Delft University of Technology, the common bond being an expressed interest in computer chess. We note gratefully that, in consequence of this informal bond, Botvinnik graced the first issue of this *Journal* (Vol. 6, No. 3) with a contribution, lending his name to the successor of the previously rather obscure *ICCA Newsletter*.

The establishment of this bond brought Mikhail repeatedly to Dutch venues. We recall, if only to demonstrate his particular brand of coloration, his provocative proposal, enunciated in Delft in April 1985, to reschedule the entire Soviet-Union into three shifts with the obvious advantage of equalizing the energy consumption over all 24 hours of the day!

Later, in June/July 1993 in Maastricht, Botvinnik was invited to contribute to the Advances in Computer Chess Conference and was hailed by the University authorities as an eminent chess-player and as a pioneer in computer chess. He declined the compliments, describing himself as "no more than a modest researcher in the field".

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Botvinnik's contributions in the pages of this *Journal* and elsewhere have been open to more controversy than agreement. His protracted distinction between the notions of algorithms and programs, while he consistently refused to discuss anything as specific as a program, alienated him from the computer-chess community.

At least one of his publications in this *Journal* (Vol. 16, No. 2) raised ruckus among the normally sedate perusers of these pages. It pretended to be able to re-play some of Botvinnik's own magisterial moves as well as to improve on the actual play of Kasparov against Ribli (1989). It was savagely attacked; not without reason, we think.

As your Editors believe, it is not the least of Botvinnik's merits to have raised the ruction at all. He saw himself as a literal pioneer guiding humanity on its way to what he considered to be a better world, his view of this world naturally being coloured by a life-long immersion in communist thought. While we may disagree with that mode of thought, it behooves us to admit its colourfulness, which has notably decreased with the death of Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik.

We recall a Latin tag: *posterii mirentur nos tam aperta nescisse* (those coming after us will wonder that we have not known such obvious truths). This applies most appropriately to Botvinnik who was and will remain forever a pioneer on the path to established truths in computer chess.

A EULOGY FOR MIKHAIL MOISEIVICH BOTVINNIK

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It was my pleasure several weeks ago to arrange for Robert Byrne to attend the 8th World Computer-Chess Championships in Hong Kong. The day after I heard of Mikhail Moiseivich's death, I had the opportunity to discuss this great man with Byrne while telling him of the travel plans. Byrne said that he had the highest admiration for Botvinnik and that he felt he was like a grandfather to him. Funny, I thought: that makes two of us. From the time I first met him at the 2nd World Computer-Chess Championship in Toronto in 1977, I too felt he was my special grandfather. I suspect there were many others who also experienced those unusually warm feelings from this unique person.

Botvinnik was born August 17, 1911 in St. Petersburg, the son of a physician. He was awarded the title of Soviet Master when he was 16 and won the Soviet Championship four years later. In 1948, he won the world championship and, except for two brief periods, reigned until Tigran Petrosian defeated him in 1963. While an electrical engineer by profession, Botvinnik ran his own chess school and had Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov as students.

In eminence, Botvinnik would stand shoulder to shoulder with the world's greatest competitors – Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali and the great soccer player Pele. On the occasions that I was fortunate enough to be with him in the old Soviet Union, he was constantly recognized on the streets and he was always gracious with autograph seekers. His quiet dignity was particularly characteristic. He never had a need to speak but everyone around him was always ready to listen. When he did speak, he spoke of many things and his interests went far beyond the game of chess and included politics, history and education.

He was always interested in discussing his ideas for the computerization of chess. He worked for years with leading Soviet computer scientists trying to program his ideas. Work on his program PIONEER was started in the middle 1960s. He was invited to enter his program in many championships over the years, and while it looked like he would participate on several occasions, he always decided that the program was not ready, not playing at the level he wanted, and he declined our invitations. He was hampered by a lack of computing facilities on a par with those in the West, but I think he also underestimated the complexity of

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