

## Korchnoi, Karpov and me

by Grandmaster Raymond Keene OBE

I have been contacted by an enterprising 17 year old German student, Keanu Siems, resident in Switzerland, who chose Viktor Korchnoi as the topic for his college thesis. Part of the thesis was an interview with me, which I think deserves a wider audience. So, with my young friend's blessing, here is a summary of what I said about one of the strongest and most controversial of players, never to have won the world championship.

*So my first question would be, how you came to be Korchnoi's second during that match in Baguio (city)?*

In 1974 I went to visit Korchnoi during the Candidates Final match against Karpov in his Dacha (country house) outside Moscow. This was the match which crowned Karpov as world champion, when Fischer refused to defend in 1975. During the trip to the Dacha I suggested to him an improvement on one of his earlier games against Karpov, and then he got to repeat the variation in his very next game as White and he obliterated Karpov in 19 moves. So I think he began to realise that I could help him if he followed my advice. So that was the first time I met him but I didn't in any way suggest being a second of his because he was a Soviet Grandmaster and it would have been very strange for a Soviet Grandmaster to have non-Soviet seconds.

*Was I in any way involved in him fleeing from the Soviet Union?*

Absolutely not, I had absolutely nothing to do with that.

After his defection I was competing in a tournament with him in Montreux in 1977, and I played a very interesting game with him, and I lost it of course. Anyway, after the game I was thinking about his candidates quarter finals match and felt that he had not attracted particularly effective support. So I thought well, I'll volunteer to become Korchnoi's second for the rest of the world championship cycle. I had just become a grandmaster, I just won the international tournament in Alicante in Spain, and I went to his room, knocked on the door and said: "I'd like to offer to become your second for the rest of the world championship cycle and I think that what I know about chess will help you to get the match.". And he thought about it for a night and then agreed, and after that we worked together and the next match was against Polugaevsky, which he won overwhelmingly. The following match was against Spassky, which was a little bit tight but he still won by a very big margin. And then the final hurdle was against Karpov, and he lost that one, but he came very close to winning.

Korchnoi wrote in some of his books, that even back then he felt like he was being treated worse than Karpov. He behaved aggressively towards the organizers so it's not surprising. I started the match as his chief second, and then half way through he made me the head of delegation as well. And after that, he managed to focus on the chess instead of fighting the

organizers. And that's when he clawed the score back to being equal. I don't think they intended to treat him badly but I think he antagonized them, for example by hiring people from the Ananda Marga sect, who were on bail for the attempted murder of an Indian diplomat.

I was the second for his match against Karpov, the match against Spassky and the match against Polugaevsky. And before that, in the quarter final, I think he had the Dutch Grandmaster Hans Ree, but that's because he was living in Holland at the time. But after that he moved to Switzerland so there was no particular point in having a Dutch second.

*So how would you describe the team of Karpov and their behaviour towards your team? Because it is said they employed a lot of weird tactics.*

Well, they had a very aggressive head of delegation, Victor Davidovich Baturinsky, who'd been a military prosecutor in Stalin's army during the second world war, so he was quite a tough guy, but he did his job and his job was to help Karpov win and obviously the consequences for Karpov if he lost I think would have been far worse than for Korchnoi if he lost, because if Korchnoi lost he was living in the west, you know, tough luck you lost, but if Karpov lost they would have been very nasty to him, especially losing to a Soviet defector. So they had more to lose by losing than we did.

*Do you think there was any danger to Korchnoi's life if he had won? Because Tal said in the movie "Closing Gambit" that they might have even killed him if he won.*

I don't think so, I think it would have been pretty obvious if they did. There wouldn't have been many suspects. It's not like Agatha Christies "Murder on the Orient Express" where there are 12 different suspects. In this case there would have been one suspect and that would have been right.

*So you mentioned the Ananda Marga sect, how did Korchnoi find them?*

They found him. During the match in Baguio, we were besieged by cranks and lunatics offering to help. Mystics, Gurus, Parapsychologists. And that's because Korchnoi thought that Dr.Zukhar , who was working for Karpov, was a Parapsychologist. So, all the loonies in the Philippines went to Korchnoi to try and help him ward off the evil mind-bending rays of Dr. Zukhar. So, they were one of the groups who approached him. And of course, I was totally opposed to this kind of thing and I wanted him to focus on the chess. But they were a bunch of charlatans and religious quacks, and they were on bail for the attempted murder of an Indian diplomat which didn't help, certainly didn't endear them to the match organizers. I mean the whole thing was a dreadful disaster. But anyway I managed to keep him focused on chess in the second half and he very nearly won.

*And you got rid of the Ananda Marga people, how did you do that?*

I got them to leave town, but it didn't help because Korchnoi chose a dubious defensive system in the final game, which wasn't one I had recommended at all. And it just made life very easy for Karpov. But anyway Korchnoi rehired the Ananda Marga people in the 1981

match in Merano and after 3 games he got rid of them, they were completely useless and they were total crooks.

*So was it Michael Stean who suggested the c5 idea in the Pirc, combined with...b6?*

Yes, he did.

*So in general do you think, that you contributed the most useful ideas?*

I think that I contributed a lot of the useful ideas and Yasha Murey contributed a lot of useful ideas and Mike was very helpful but some of his ideas about the openings were inappropriate and that was one of them. Korchnoi, at that moment, needed to play something solid with black and then press with white in the next game because Karpov's stamina was giving out and all Korchnoi needed to do really was not to lose. I mean Victor was incredibly strong physically and he was much more physically fit than Karpov. And you can see the same thing happening in the 1984/85 match against Kasparov: When he was in a very long match, he started to faint physically. Whereas Korchnoi and Kasparov were both absolutely fine while Karpov was physically somewhat frail. And that showed when he became involved in a long match. I think my main contribution to the match was, when I took over as the head of delegation, Korchnoi started to win. And he managed to win 4 games while I was head of delegation. Against just one prior in the match. And he pulled back from being 4-1 down to 5-5 and that's when I was in charge of things, so I think what I did actually was a major contribution to the match. And if he hadn't played this poorly timed opening in the last game, I think he would have won

*What would you have suggested him to play?*

Probably the open variation of the Ruy Lopez or maybe the Caro-Kann or even the French defence: Karpov never beat him in the match with the French defence. And I don't think he had beaten him in the 1974 match either when he played the French defence. It was only when he started playing risky stuff as black that he started to lose.

*And why do you think he thought that it was a good idea? Because like to me the Pirc is also something I would consider to be a good opening at elite grandmaster level.*

No, I think it's okay, but not in that match situation. And not with that move. ...c5 is playable in that position, you can play it but it just makes White's life too simple. It doesn't pose big problems. White plays d5 and after that it's quite easy. I mean okay, Black can resist, it's possible. There are lots of ways of playing it with Black. But it's a difficult variation for Black. In fact afterwards I played it once myself in that position against a Romanian player called Ghindă in 1981. But in that situation in Baguio it was the wrong thing to do. And it wasn't so much ...c5 was wrong, it was the idea of playing ....b6, ...Bb7 later on because the bishop on b7 is fighting against a granite wall of pawns on d5 and e4 and possibly even on f3. So if you're going to play ...c5, then don't play ...b6 and bishop b7. Put the bishop on another square.

So ...c5 is not so bad, but ...b6 and bishop b7 as a follow up is, in my opinion, absolutely ridiculous. And he did play the Pirc against Karpov in one earlier game and he made a draw. So the Pirc isn't so bad, the Caro-Kann isn't so bad, the French isn't so bad. But that particular line of the Pirc struck me as very bad. Interestingly, though, modern engines insist that even after such moves, that Black is still OK, as will be seen from my notes which follow.

*Do you think then that Korchnoi was trying to win with the black pieces?*

I think he was trying to win, which again I think was bad psychology at that point.

*Before the last game, didn't Dr. Euwe offer to you to adjourn the match?*

He did! He said, shall we call the match a draw and have a rematch next year? And the reasons I objected to that were, one, I think that the chess world was really excited by the situation, and now you don't get to the Wimbledon final and when it is deuce after 5 sets and say let's call it a draw and say let's come back next year, you don't do that. It's robbing the spectators of the sporting thrill of the match. And I thought it was morally wrong. And the second thing was, that if I suggested it to Korchnoi, and he accepted, then in the rematch he might think: "Oh I threw away my best chance. Karpov was very tired, I've just beaten him 3 times in a row, why did I agree to that". But then if he turned it down and he got a bad position, he would be thinking all the time: "Oh I should have accepted the offer, I should have accepted the offer!" and then start to play badly. So I thought the best thing was to just reject the offer on moral grounds. It wasn't in the rules. It was a degradation or a dereliction of sporting duty to the fans worldwide. We would have come in for a lot of frenzied criticism. I mean if we had called the match off at this point, I think the world would have gone crazy, saying that we are cowards and wrong and it would have been very bad news. So I don't regret the decision at all.

*And why do you think Dr. Euwe proposed that to you?*

Because, I think, the Soviets proposed it to him. Because they were terrified of losing.

*And what do you think the reaction would have been if Karpov had lost?*

I think if they had called the match off, they would not have punished him, because that would have demoralized him for the rematch. I think they would have treated him very well and perhaps suggested to him that he improve his physical condition for the rematch, in case the rematch went on for a long time. You can see the pattern, that when Karpov started to lose in the match against Kasparov in 1985, exactly the same thing happened, and they called off the match and you saw there was a storm of worldwide protest when that happened. And that's what I wanted to avoid, getting a whole lot of criticism like: why has Korchnoi just won 3 games in a row, chickened out, and not tried to press his advantage. Everyone would have come out of it very badly. As indeed did Campomanes and Karpov, when they called off the match in 1985. And that didn't do them any good at all. Also, the chief arbiter, Lothar Schmid left for the final game.

*Do you think the Soviets basically pulled all of the levers to ensure Karpov not losing?*

Yes! For example, they brought back Dr. Zukhar to the front row of the auditorium, which they had agreed not to do. I think if Lothar Schmid had been there, this would not have happened. But unfortunately, the person that took over was Miroslav Filip, from Czechoslovakia. And of course at that time the Czechs were under the thumb of the Soviets, so they just did everything the Soviets told them. So Lothar Schmid leaving was unfortunate as well.

*So there were a lot of top Grandmasters playing tournaments in Czechoslovakia at that time. Did any of them offer support via phone calls or was it really just the 4 of you preparing for the games?*

We got phone calls, we got ideas. But usually it was just the core group. It was Panno, Murey, me and Stean, and Korchnoi. Oscar Panno was there as well to help Korchnoi. By and large, we tended to take not much notice of external suggestions .

*Korchnoi had a tradition of blaming his helpers when he lost. So did Korchnoi hold his grudge against you for long? You organized the match between him and Kasparov later, right?*

By the time when I organized the match between him and Kasparov, we were friends again. And in fact I was instrumental in getting the Soviet ban against him lifted, when we had the Manila congress of FIDÉ in 1983. I was the person to propose that the ban be officially lifted, and it was. And after that he was allowed to play against Soviet players in tournaments. So I think I did Korchnoi a lot of good.

*And in the later years, after 2000, have you had much contact with him or have you visited him in Switzerland?*

No I never visited him in Switzerland but he played in one tournament I organized in London. I think it was in 2008, I can't quite remember. It was a Staunton memorial at Simpson's in the Strand and he played in that, and he also played in a couple of tournaments in London, came to my house, had dinner and things. So I think he realized that his criticism had obviously been quite misguided. Especially when I got the Soviet ban lifted against him.

Cancelling the Soviet boycott involved trips to Moscow and tournaments around the world, getting Kasparov on my side and getting FIDÉ on my side, persuading the Russians that they had to do the right thing. And I think as a result of that I got the OBE from the Queen. You know, OBE is Officer of the British Empire. It is a British honour. And it was after that when I received the OBE from the Queen for services to chess and international diplomacy.

**Viktor Korchnoi vs. Anatoly Karpov**

Candidates Final (1974), Moscow URS, rd. 21

Queen's Indian Defence

**1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 e6 3. g3 b6 4. Bg2 Bb7 5. c4 Be7 6. Nc3 O-O 7. Qc2 c5 8. d5 exd5 9. Ng5**

This was the crux of my improvement over earlier play , where Korchnoi had focused on creating a central pawn majority, even involving retreats like Qc2 back to d1. My idea was to go straight for Black's king.

Obviously, 9... h6 is met robustly with 10. h4, and similarly after 9... Na6, there follows, 10. h4 h6 11. Bd2 Nb4 12. Qb1 Ne4 13. Ngxe4 dxe4 14. a3 Nc6 15. Bxe4.

**9... Nc6 10. Nxd5 g6 11. Qd2 Nxd5 12. Bxd5 Rb8??**



An inexplicable blunder by Karpov . As we shall see, the g5 knight must first be eliminated! 32 years later Fontaine improved against Tkachiev with 12... Bxg5, a move Stockfish also promotes: 12... Bxg5! 13. Qxg5 Rb8 14. Qxd8 Rfxd8 15. Bf4 d6 16. Rd1 Nb4 17. a3 Nc2+ 18. Kf1 Nd4 19. h4 Bxd5 20. cxd5, when White is still more comfortable than Black, despite his wonderful knight entrenched on d4.

**13. Nxh7!!**

One error. One devastating demonstration of the oversight that error constituted.

**13... Re8?**

If you scour a database of Karpov's games, I doubt that you will find any two successive blunders as those the soon-to-be-champion nervously offers up in this game? Perhaps it was the full adverse consequence of his previous move that brought about this rush of the normally ice-cold fluid that ran through his veins. The knight is, of course, out of the question, as a forced mate in eight follows: 13... Kxh7?? 14. Qh6+ Kg8 15. Qxg6+! Kh8 16. Qh5+ Kg8 17. Be4 f5 18. Bd5+ Rf7 19. Qxf7+ Kh8 20. Qh5+ Kg7 21. Qh6 checkmate. Prosaically correct was 13... Nd4, but after 14. Nxf8 Bxd5 15. cxd5 Bxf8 16. O-O White enjoys a considerable advantage both materially and positionally.

**14. Qh6!?**



Even stronger was, 14. Qf4 Ne5 15. Qxe5 d6 16. Qe4 Bxd5 Qxd5 Kxh7 18. Qxf7+ Kh8 19. Qxg6.

**14... Ne5 15. Ng5 Bxg5 16. Bxg5 Qxg5 17. Qxg5 Bxd5 18. O-O**

One final fool's trap had been made available, namely 18. cxd5?? Nf3+ turning the tables.

**18... Bxc4 19. f4**

Black resigns 1-0.

Some analysts have claimed that Karpov, perhaps due to the emotional impact of being a contender for the world crown and losing in such a fashion, resigned prematurely? Although the following cannot be absolutely definitive, Stockfish makes a very strong case that such a view is without foundation. Karpov is well and truly busted. For example:

a) 19... Bxe2 20. fxe5 Bxf1 21. Rxf1 Re6 22. h4 Rbe8 23. h5 a5 (23... b5 24. Kg2 b4 25. Qf4 Rf8 26. hxg6 Rxg6 27. Rh1) 24. Kg2 a4 25. Qh4 Kg7 26. Qf4 Rf8 27. Qg5;

b) 19... Nc6 20. f5 Re5 21. Qf5 Rxe5 22. Qxc4 Nd4 23. Rxf5 Nxf5 24. Qf4 Rf8 25. e4 Ng7 26. Qd6 Re8 27. Qxd7.

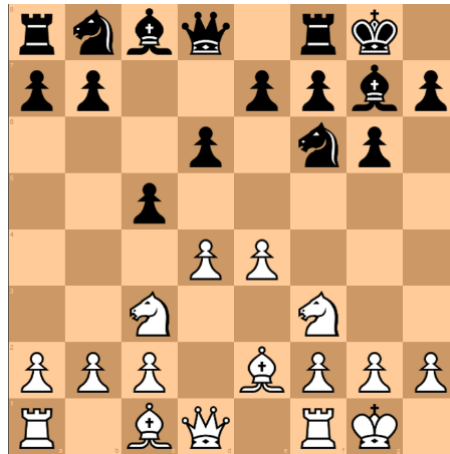
### **Anatoly Karpov vs. Viktor Korchnoi**

World Championship Match (1978), Baguio, rd. 32

Pirc Defense: Classical Variation.

**1. e4 d6 2. d4 Nf6 3. Nc3 g6 4. Nf3 Bg7 5. Be2 O-O 6. O-O c5**





Korchnoi varies from the standard 6... Bg4 which he had played in the eighteenth game. The text leads to a position more commonly reached by the move order 1. d4 c5 2. d5 Nf6 3. Nc3 d6 4. e4 g6 5. Nf3 Bg7 6. O-O O-O – an unusual and rather dubious variation championed by the chief arbiter of the present match, Lothar Schmid. This variation produces an uncompromising struggle, which is what Korchnoi wanted. In retrospect it might have been more circumspect to play a quieter defence with Black with a view to drawing this game and winning with White in game thirty-three. But after Karpov's recent collapse who can blame Korchnoi for trying to finish the match in the present game.

**7. d5 Na6 8. Bf4 Nc7 9. a4 b6 10. Re1 Bb7 11. Bc4 Nh5? 12. Bg5 Nf6**

An admission that his last move was a mistake. If 12... h6 13. Bh4 g5 14. Nd2! is better for White.

*However, this is still a poor attempt to redress the balance. Stockfish consider there to be no problem with Black's position, after the two following alternatives to the text.*

*a) 12... Qd7 13. Ra3 Ba6 14. Ba2 Bb7 15. Qd2 a6 16. e5 b5 17. exd6 exd6;*

*b) 12... h6 13. Bc1 Nf6 14. Nb5 Kh7 15. Ra3 a6 16. Nxc7 Qxc7.*

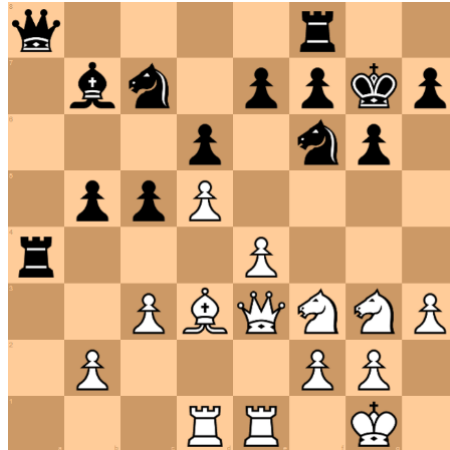
*To human eyes the legendary resilience of the engines is hard to fathom. My primary criticism of the black set up was the misplaced bishop on b7, biting on the granite of White's central pawn constellation. Yet the engine not only wastes a tempo (...Bb7-a6) but replaces the bishop on b7 the very next move and postulates near equality for Black!*

**13. Qd3 a6 14. Rad1 Rb8 15. h3 Nd7 16. Qe3 Ba8 17. Bh6 b5**

Black has obtained his strategic objective of expanding on the queenside but it does not achieve very much. The play now revolves round White's attempt to achieve his strategic objective – the advance e4-e5. If he can play this move in favourable circumstances his space advantage will guarantee him the better game.

**18. Bxg7 Kxg7 19. Bf1 Nf6 20. axb5 axb5 21. Ne2 Bb7 22. Ng3 Ra8 23. c3 Ra4 24. Bd3 Qa8**





Black is trying to prevent e4-e5 by piling up on White's d5-pawn so that the advance of his e4-pawn will leave the d5-pawn too exposed. But White gets in e4-e5 anyway through a tactical trick. Better, therefore, was 24... Re8 holding up the advance.

*Perhaps even slightly better were either, 24... c4 or ...Kh8, according to Stockfish.*

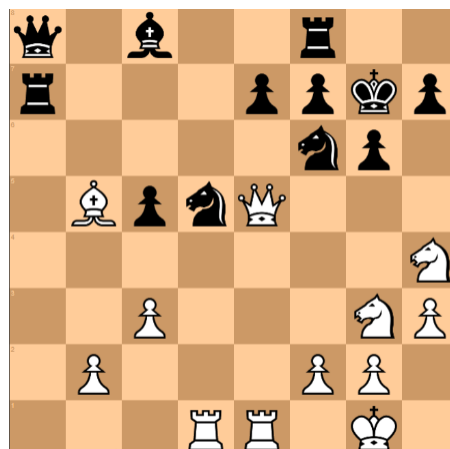
#### **25. e5 dxe5**

If Black had played 24... Kh8 he could now have refuted White's central thrust by 25. e4 Ncxd5 but this now loses to 26. exf6 check. It seems that Black could have played 25... Nfxd5 but then comes the crushing 26. Nh5+!! mating e.g. Kg8 28. Qh6 or 26... gxh5 27. Qg5+ Kh8 28. Qh6 f5 29. Ng5. Korchnoi denies Karpov the satisfaction of finishing the match off in this elegant manner.

#### **26. Qxe5 Nxd5 27. Bxb5 Ra7**

27... Ra5 trying to bolster up the weakling c5-pawn may be an improvement.

#### **28. Nh4 Bc8**



Even now Black could have resisted.

*28... Bc8?? is a losing move. Yet after 28. Nh4, it can hardly even be said that Black is worse. Black must try: 28... Qc8! 29. Qg5 e6 30. c4 Nf4 31. Qc5 (31. Re3 Ba8 32. Nhf5+ exf5 33. Nxf5+ Kg8 34. Qxf6 gxf5 35. h4 Nh5 36. Qxf5 Ng7) 31... Ra2 32. Qd4 Qc7 33. Ne2 Nxe2+ 34. Rxe2 Rfa8 35. Red2 Ra1 36. b4 e5, when Black has equalised, according to Stockfish.*

**29. Be2 Be6 30. c4 Nb4 31. Qxc5**

White is now a pawn up with the better position. Normally, Korchnoi would have resigned about now but in the circumstances he chooses to fight on to the bitter end. The final few moves represent a tragic climax to Korchnoi's bid for the world championship. Fortunately he was too short of time to consider the pathos of the situation.

**31... Qb8 32. Bf1 Rc8 33. Qg5 Kh8 34. Rd2 Nc6 35. Qh6 Rg8 36. Nf3 Qf8 37. Qe3 Kg7 38. Ng5 Bd7 39. b4 Qa8 40. b5 Na5 41. b6 Rb7**

The sealed move. **Korchnoi resigned** without resuming. And the world was left with another item for the database of what-could-have-beens.

Ray's 206th book, "[Chess in the Year of the King](#)", written in collaboration with former Reuters chess correspondent, Adam Black, appeared earlier this year.

Now his 207th, "[Napoleon and Goethe: The Touchstone of Genius](#)" (which discusses their relationship with chess and explains how Ray used Napoleonic era battle strategies to develop his own chess style) has materialised, just in time to complement Ridley Scott's new epic biopic, 'Napoleon'.

Both books are available from *Amazon* and *Blackwell's*.