

Hero of the Pre-War Olympiads Grandmaster Vladimirs Petrovs

Dmitry Kryakvin and Galina Petrova-Matisa

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Part I: Selected Games and Career, by Dmitry Kryakvin (2013)

Vladimirs Petrovs is one of the most enigmatic and tragic figures in chess history. His name was struck out of chess literature for decades. His games and biography are largely unknown to the public – even though Petrovs defeated Alekhine, Fine, Reshevsky, Boleslavsky and many other famous players of the past, gained prizes at many supertournaments and won some outright, as well as performing strongly on first board at chess Olympiads.

The Leading Scorer of the Latvian Team

The idea of writing what was originally a series of articles came up after a long argument with one of my friends who knew chess history very well. My friend was of the opinion that we tend to overestimate the strength of past masters, especially if they are our compatriots – we speculate and read too much into their biography. Take Klaus Junge, for instance – a talented German chess player who perished during World War II. Suddenly, someone shows interest in his games, and he quickly gets covered by myths and legends. He allegedly had a huge plus score against Alekhine, and he was also the one who developed the Botvinnik System, with the Patriarch merely copying his analysis, and had he stayed alive, he would have become the sixth world champion, destroying all the Soviet players in the match tournament. Or, if the article is written by someone who suffered under Soviet rule, it's usually colored in emotional black

and bright red. Or, say, let's take some provincial master who played well in the last century: in the eyes of his fellow townsmen, he was a genius and would surely have won the Soviet Championship, had it not been the sinister hand of the Kremlin



A young Vladimirs Petrovs, 1924

stopping him, forcing him to lose to some KGB-backed grandmaster at a crucial moment. Well, he drank a bit and behaved somewhat seditiously, the local sports committee disliked him for that, didn't allow him to go abroad for tournaments, he didn't get called up to the Russian SFSR team, even though he was at least as talented as Karpov! In other words, they nipped a future world champion in the bud...

My deliberations about Petrovs' strength and talent were met with the same kind of skepticism. What was his score in the Soviet Championship? Minus one? How many Soviet masters had a plus score in the Soviet Championships but never became grandmasters? Don't you remember Keres checkmating him in the opening, haven't you read *Paul Keres Chess University*? These arguments could only be countered with facts, and so, to try to convince my incredulous friend, I had to analyze dozens of games played by Vladimirs Petrovs. As I studied the books and articles about the Latvian grandmaster, I noticed that the annotations of his games were rather short and shallow, and it was hard to use them as proof of Petrovs' strength. Dates and events are sometimes mixed up. But we shouldn't blame the authors: after all, they did bring to light the appalling story that happened to one of the most talented players of the pre-war period. I would like

to share my thoughts from this research. So, dear readers, let's dive into the career of Grandmaster Vladimirs Petrovs!

Petrovs took up chess at the age of 13 and achieved success relatively quickly. At the age of 15, he won a secondary tournament of the first Latvian Congress, and two years later, he shared 2nd–3rd places in the main tournament. His games against Latvian masters Matisons and Apsenieks were hard-fought battles, and in 1925, Petrovs won the Riga Championship in brilliant style, two points ahead of the runner-up. After these successes, the young player was invited to the Latvian national team to compete at the Hague Olympiad (1928).

The novice wasn't trusted with a high board – he played board 3 – and the line-up of his opponents was rather modest, including only a few masters. His overall score was also quite modest, 8.5/16. The Olympiad consisted of 17 rounds, and Petrovs rested only once, after losing to Steiner. His only substantial achievement was his win against Poland's Kazimierz Makarczyk, one of the players featured in Evgeny Gik's book *Funny Stories from Chess Players' Lives*. The Polish team was rather strong, featuring Akiba Rubinstein and Savielly Tartakower (who hadn't settled in France yet). In 1930, Poland would win the Olympiad, and Makarczyk would later earn the master's title.

Game 1

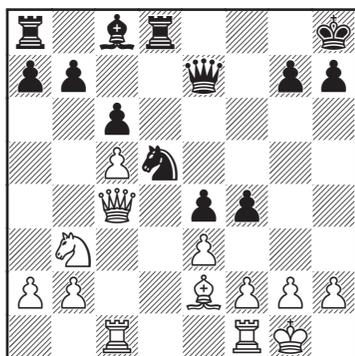
V. Petrovs – K. Makarczyk

The Hague 1928, round 9

(Latvia – Poland)

Queen's Gambit Declined

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. f3 f6 4. g5
 ♖e7 5. ♘c3 0-0 6. e3 ♘bd7 7. ♖c1 c6
 8. ♗c2 ♗e4 9. ♙xe7 ♗xe7 10. ♘xe4
 dxe4 11. ♘d2 f5 12. c5 e5 13. ♙e2
 exd4 14. ♗c4+ ♙h8 15. ♗xd4 ♖d8
 16. ♘b3 ♘b6 17. ♗c3 ♘d5 18. ♗c4
 f4 19. 0-0



White's opening play was quite poor and he got under attack. Now black could win an exchange and the game with 19...f3 20.gxf3 ♙h3, but this simple resource was left unnoticed.

19...♖f8? 20.exf4 ♖xf4 21. ♘d4 ♗g5?!

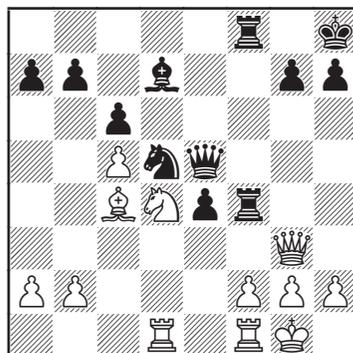
In the post-mortem analysis, the opponents found a pretty line 21...e3!, and if 22.fx3?, then 22...♘xe3! 23.♘xc6 ♗g5! 24.♗e4 ♙f5!, and black wins.

22. ♗b3 ♗e5?!

22...e3 still worked: 23. ♘f3 (not 23.fx3 ♘xe3) 23...exf2+ 24. ♙h1

(24.♖xf2 ♖xf3 loses) 24...♗e7 25.♖xf2 ♙g4 with a big advantage for black. Now, however, all three results become possible.

23. ♖cd1 ♖b8 24. ♗g3 ♙d7
 25. ♙c4 ♖bf8



Petrovs had gradually outplayed his opponent, and 26.♘e2 forced a transition to a favorable endgame. However, there followed

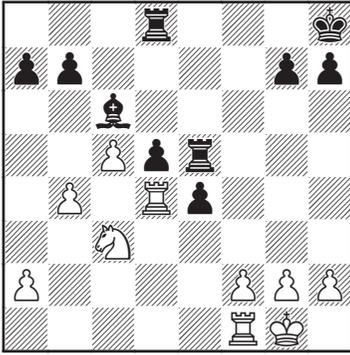
26. ♙xd5?

ChessBase gave this move an exclamation mark, but it's a mistake – both by the players and the commentator.

26...cxd5?

A mistake in return. Black could have cheekily taken the bishop with 26...♗xd5!; white has two pawns in prise, and 27.♘e2 is met with 27...♖xf2, with black still having an extra pawn. After Makarczyk's mistake, Petrovs forces a queen exchange in the best possible situation and tightens his positional grip on black's throat.

27. ♘e2 ♖4f5 28. ♗xe5 ♖xe5
 29. ♘c3 ♙c6 30. b4 ♖d8 31. ♖d4



31...♔g8 32.♖fd1 e3 33.fxe3
 ♗xe3 34.♘xd5 ♙xd5 35.♖xd5
 ♗xd5 36.♖xd5, and white showed
 good technique in converting his
 extra pawn. The game is uneven,
 but we should bear in mind that
 Vladimirs Petrovs was only 19 years
 old – a small kid by the standards
 of the time, and it was his first
 tournament abroad. Still, I don't
 want to imagine what the great
 Akiba could have said to the Polish
 player after the game.

Two years later, however, the
 novice of the Latvian team had
 improved considerably. He played
 board 3 again, but this time, he
 performed as an apex predator,
 scoring 11/17 and not missing a
 single game, even though he faced
 such strong players as Winter,
 Eliskases, Takacs, Landau, Ahues,
 Stahlberg, Tartakower and Frank
 Marshall himself! Petrovs made a
 flying start – 4.5/5 – and he again
 won an important game in the
 match against Poland. This time,
 the Riga player took down the

author of *The Hypermodern Game
 of Chess*.

Game 2

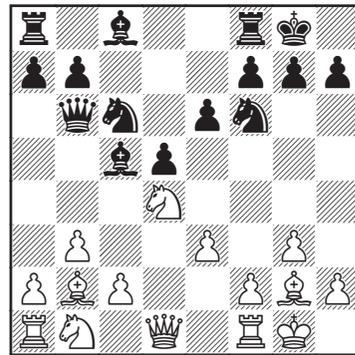
S. Tartakower – V. Petrovs

Hamburg 1930, round 3

(Poland – Latvia)

Queen's Pawn Game

1.d4 ♘f6 2.g3 d5 3.♙g2 e6 4.♘f3
 c5 5.0-0 ♘c6 6.b3 cxd4 7.♘xd4
 ♙c5 8.♙b2 ♗b6 9.e3 0-0



The grandmaster of chess
 journalism was rather creative in
 his opening play: here, 10.♘xc6
 bxc6 11.♙xf6 gxf6 seems logical.
 To be honest, I can't understand why
 that position has been evaluated in
 white's favor. Because he can give a
 check? I think that Petrovs would
 have gladly played that position as
 black, relying on the potential of his
 bishop pair. White probably should
 play 12.♘c3 here (both 12.♗g4+
 ♔h8 13.♗h4 ♗d8 14.c4 f5 and 12.c4
 d4 pose no trouble for black) 12...
 ♙e7 13.♘a4 with the subsequent
 c4, trying to fix the pawn structure

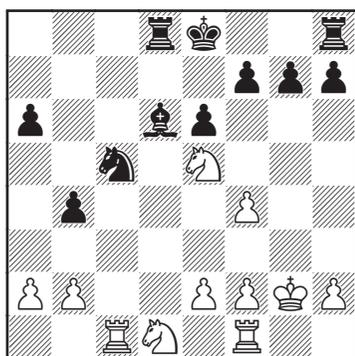
Game 28

V. Petrovs – A. Alekhine

Margate 1938, round 5

Catalan Opening

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2
 dxc4 5.♚a4+ ♘bd7 6.♘f3 a6 7.♘c3
 ♖b8 8.♚xc4 b5 9.♚d3 ♙b7 10.0-0
 c5 11.dxc5 ♘xc5 12.♚xd8+ ♖xd8
 13.♙f4 b4 14.♘d1 ♘d5 15.♖c1
 ♘xf4 16.gxf4 ♙d6 17.♘e5 ♙xg2
 18.♚xg2



In this position, the d1 knight is out of play, but black needs to counter the threat ♘e5-c6. Alekhine solves the threat in the most radical way.

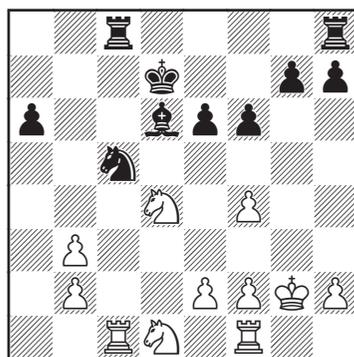
18...b3! 19.axb3 f6?!

But this is imprecise. Alexander Alekhine thinks that the white pawns aren't going anywhere and chases the white knight, but 19... ♘xb3! 20.♖c6 g5 or 20... ♘d4 was stronger – black has some micro-plus, but there's too little material left on the board, and white has good drawing chances.

20.♘c6 ♖c8

Funnily enough, some sources suggested that black could get an advantage with 20... ♘xb3 21.♘xd8 ♘xc1 22.♘xe6 ♚f7 23.♘d4? ♙xf4. White's dynamics are so well-hidden that his position got underestimated by both Alekhine and the commentators. After the strongest 23.f5! ♘xe2 24.♚f3! ♘c1 25.♘e3 ♘b3 (25... ♘d3 26.♖d1 ♘e5+ 27.♚e4 is no better) 26.♖d1 ♙e7 27.♖d7, white is close to winning, so black's move was correct.

21.♘d4 ♚d7?! Another step towards the abyss. As in a later game against Fine at the AVRO tournament, Alekhine relies upon the weakness of his opponent's pawns and sends his king towards the center, getting under fire from the numerous enemy pieces. After the modest 21... ♚f7 22.e3 ♖b8 23.♘c3 ♘xb3 24.♘xb3 ♖xb3 25.♘e4, the game was most likely drawn. Black probably wanted to get his king closer to the important events after 22.e3, but he was up for a big surprise!



22.♘e3! ♙xf4 23.♖fd1

Black can create two pairs of doubled pawns in white's position, but how to defend against tactical threats?

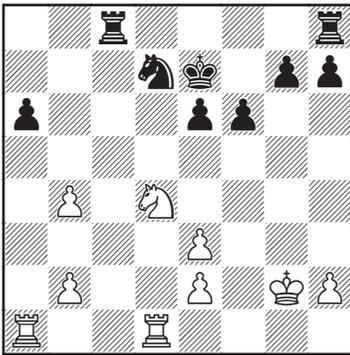
23...♔e7?

And this is a mistake! The discovered check is not dangerous, and after the cold-blooded 23...♘e4! 24.♖a1 ♕xe3 25.fxe3 ♗a8 26.♘f5+ ♔e8 27.♘xg7+ ♔e7, white's shattered pawns give him no winning chances. But why is the king move so bad?

24.b4! ♕xe3?

Alekhine could still have saved the game with the tactical trick 24...♘a4 25.♖xc8 ♖xc8 26.♖a1 ♕e5!, but he hoped to win.

25.fxe3 ♘d7 26.♖a1!

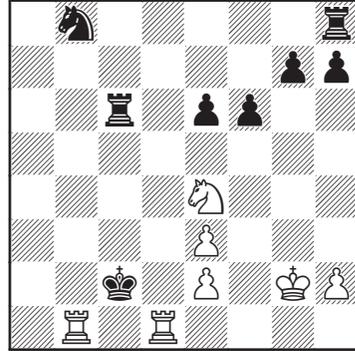


An incredible position! White's pawn structure is completely broken, and black's one is ideal, but Alekhine can't save the game because his pieces cannot regroup in time, and the a6 pawn is doomed!

26...♘b8 27.b5 axb5 28.♖a7+ ♔d6 29.♘xb5+ ♔c5 30.♘d6 ♖c6 31.b4+!

31.♘e4+ ♔b6 32.♖xg7 also won, but Petrovs chose a beautiful and technical line.

31...♔xb4 32.♖b7+ ♔c3 33.♘e4+ ♔c2 34.♖bb1



Checkmate is inevitable, and Alekhine resigned. It's hard to remember another game where the fourth world champion was destroyed so comprehensively.

Before the last round, only the Latvian grandmaster could still challenge the world champion: 1. Alekhine – 6.5/8, 2. Petrovs – 5.5, 3–4. Spielmann, Book – 5. Alas, Vladimirs blundered against Spielmann in their head-to-head game and only took third place.

Back then, the Estonian team played regular matches against their neighbors – Lithuania, Latvia and Finland. In 1937, Estonia defeated Lithuania in a tense battle – 8.5–7.5, then, in 1938, they defeated Finland 9.6–6.5, and finally, they invited their strongest rival in the Baltic region, Latvia. This time, the Estonians couldn't win: the guests won by a

Part II: A Star Prematurely Extinguished, by Galina Petrova-Matisa (2008)

The widow of Grandmaster Vladimirs Mikhailovich Petrovs remembers both the tragic fate of her husband and other family members crushed in the grinders of Stalin's repressions, but also the happy times of their short life together, including unforgettable meetings with the strongest chess players of the time.

“Shine, Shine, My Star...”

“If I die, then, over my grave, shine, shine my star.” Did Vladimirs Mikhailovich Petrovs ever think that these words would be prophetic for him, that he would die in August 1943 in one of the camps of the Gulag Archipelago? He perished at the age of 35, at the peak of his physical and creative strength.

My husband loved the sentimental song “Shine, Shine, My Star”. He often sang it, listened to it on the gramophone, and even played it on the piano. I remember him once saying to me, “Such beautiful, profound words.” Maybe he experienced premonitions of his fate.

At my husband's request, I tried to find out who the author was, but during his lifetime I only managed to learn that the music was written by Petr Bulakhov, while the lyrics were anonymous – even though the authorship was attributed to Gumilev, Bunin and even Kolchak... Only much later did I learn that the real author of the lyrics was Vladimir Chuevsky, a law student of Moscow University. The song lingered in obscurity for many years and only became popular during World War I, thanks to the arrangement of the talented singer Vladimir Sabinin, who volunteered for the army. Sabinin made a true patriotic anthem out of the song, a declaration of love for the only true and coveted star – Russia. A record of Sabinin's version of the song was released in 1915, and the entire country started to sing it! And soon afterwards, the song shared the fate of many true masterpieces: it was mistakenly termed a “folk song”. Petrovs had a notebook for recording quotes, thoughts, comments, and aphorisms of famous chess players. On the first page of this notebook, however, he jotted down this song's lyrics, which often baffled me. My husband never explained to me the relevance of those lyrics to chess.

Until his posthumous rehabilitation in March 1989, Petrovs' name was completely buried, struck out of chess life in both the USSR as a whole and Latvia in particular, even though he was the first Latvian grandmaster

and represented the republic at all chess Olympiads and international tournaments. He didn't exist for his motherland. He was an enemy of the people.

Only abroad could you find articles about an “outstanding chess player”, with his games printed and analyzed; chess players remembered their encounters with Petrovs and shared their guesses and speculation about his fate. Nobody knew anything, the man just disappeared without trace. They also asked me, but I knew nothing about my husband's fate either. Finally, after endless searches and appeals to the authorities, I learned that V. M. Petrovs was arrested in Moscow in August 1942, sentenced to 10 years of labor camp for anti-Soviet propaganda, and died while serving his sentence. (*According to Sergei Grodzensky in his book The Lubyanka Gambit, the author was told this information in 1948.*) There was nothing said about when, how or why my husband died. I spent decades trying to obtain this information. My requests for posthumous rehabilitation were refused several times. But it was necessary, and not only for me. I never lost hope that people would talk about Grandmaster Petrovs again and pay tribute to his chess talent, and that a star would once again shine over his grave – which is still unknown to this day. And indeed, after Petrovs' rehabilitation in 1989, his legacy has been gradually restored.

A New Passion That Became the Main One

Vladimirs Mikhailovich Petrovs was born on 27th September 1908 in Riga. An ethnic Russian, a Riga native. Petrovs' parents were also from Riga. His father was Mikhail Tikhonovich Petrov (Petrovs), born in 1872. His mother was Anastasia Parfenovna Petrova *nee* Grozdyakova. His father had a small cobbler's workshop on Avotu Street, with a modest shoe store. His mother was a housewife. They had three children: an older daughter Zinaida, a daughter Natalia and a son Vladimirs – the pride, joy and darling of the family. The Petrovs family rented a four-room flat on 64a Matisa Street, flat 4, not far from the workshop.

In 1919, Vladimirs Petrovs enrolled in the Russian middle school in Riga, unofficially known as the “Lomonosov Grammar School”, since the building had hosted the Lomonosov Women's Grammar School until evacuation in 1915. Petrovs was a decent pupil, but only got especially good grades for the subjects that matched his interests – for instance, history, which later became a major hobby for him.

Petrovs' first passion was football. Nimble, quick, creative, able to use his head on the field, he was a natural-born footballer. Lomonosov Grammar was

The prices weren't high, and we could afford that. Every restaurant and even small cafe in Riga had its own famous signature dish. And since there were a lot of them in the city, we had a very wide choice.

Yes, this was a happy life – happy until 1941, when the sinister arms of Stalin's executioners reached our family.

A Century-Long Show

The husband of Petrovs' sister was the first victim. He was arrested in Riga, and his trace disappeared in the NKVD basements on Stabu Street; later, when the German army left, his photo in prison robes was found in the courtyard. Then my dear uncle, Hermans Andrejevich Punga (the husband of my mom's sister), was arrested, too.

I feel obliged to dedicate some paragraphs to his blessed memory. He was a most interesting man with a remarkable biography. An ethnic Latvian, born in Liepaja, he was once a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party, spent quite a bit of time abroad, was arrested several times and sent to internal exile, but escaped. By chance, he was introduced to Chertkov, Tolstoy's secretary – they were friends for 15 years. My uncle traveled with him to England, serving as a tutor to Chertkov's son, Dmitry. In England, thanks to his friend's support, he obtained a higher education and became an eminent engineer. He knew Tolstoy himself as well, visiting him in Yasnaya Polyana numerous times. Punga once published his recollections of that period of his life. When my uncle was arrested and thrown into Warsaw prison, Tolstoy's family interceded in his favor. I remember a figurine of Tolstoy leaning on his walking staff on my uncle's desk, with a dedication, "To dear Hermans Andrejevich Punga from Leo Tolstoy."

It was in Chertkov's English house that my uncle met my mother's sister, Elena Khristoforovna. They got married and relocated to the



Hermans Andrejevich Punga – the Finance Minister in Cakste's government

Urals, where Punga became director of the famous Pashkov glass factories. My childhood memories begin with the Urals – they're connected with the Punga family: my mom brought me and my sister to visit them. Those were uncertain times. The revolution happened as we were there. My father Mikhail Mikhailovich Zenets, a railway engineer, was the son of a well-known medical professor from St. Petersburg. He was a port manager in Feodosia, living separately from our family, and I don't remember him much. Then my father died, and our fate became inextricably tied with the family of my uncle, who brought us to Latvia in 1921. Punga became the Finance Minister in Cakste's government, and then served as a diplomat in the USSR, Germany and England. He retired in 1939 and went back to Latvia. He was arrested in early 1941 and died in the Riga Central Prison on 22nd April 1941. [*Galina Mikhailovna only managed to obtain his death certificate in the mid-1990s – Vladimir Dedkov.*] I learned from one of the men who shared a cell with him that my uncle was brought back half-dead after interrogation. We can only imagine which methods of interrogation were used, especially considering that my uncle was a well-known man. After one interrogation, Punga was not brought back... They didn't get to sentence him – apparently, they tortured him to death before he could be taken to court.

On 18th October 1996, a cross was erected beside Riga Central Prison, on a symbolic grave of everyone who was tortured to death, killed or died on their own in the cells and basements. People always bring flowers to that grave. May your memory last forever too, my dear uncle Hermans!

His arrest shook us all to the core, and we were in constant fear for our other family members. Who's going to be next? This thought gnawed on our minds, made us lose sleep, and didn't let us live calmly or breathe freely.

In 1940, after Latvia's annexation, the country's chess life also took a sharp turn. After the first year of Soviet rule, the future was not clear yet, but Petrovs, as a chess player who could calculate several moves ahead, immediately realized that he wouldn't be able to represent Latvia in international tournaments anymore. Still, a new, unknown world of Soviet chess opened before him. It would have been so much better had he never known that world...

Volodya finished in tenth place the 12th Soviet Championship. "If the genius Keres only managed to share 12th–13th place when he debuted in Moscow in 1939, and showed some progress this time to take 4th place, the one who took 10th place on the first try has nothing more to wish for," he said. Of course, much more was expected from him – he possessed solid knowledge and great positional understanding. As Levenfish wrote at the time in *64*, Vladimirs lost his composure after defeats to Boleslavsky and Smyslov when

he had won positions in both games. Otherwise, he would have taken a higher place.

Publicly, Petrovs himself cited “a lack of practice and constant time trouble” as the reason for his poor performance but I think that this wasn’t the whole truth. Of course, after the Flohrs told him about Moscow, that you should fear your every word there, that they listen to everything, know everything, that you should be wary of any new acquaintance, Volodya, who was quite a worrier anyway, became mistrustful and morose in respect of all things Soviet.

When we returned from Hamburg, I told Petrovs how Terletsky, the Soviet consul, had invited Uncle Hermans onto a Soviet steamship, and how enraptured I was with everything (I showed him the book *How the Steel Was Tempered*, given to me by Terletsky; later, we both read the book). Volodya thought for some time, then said, “I think that this was all *for show*. We know nothing about the country. Only rumors, rumors and rumors... Wouldn’t I like to see everything for myself, get to know and understand it.” The dream came true... He did get to see everything for himself and did get to know everything.

Before going to the 12th Soviet Championship, Petrovs decided to take an active role in the reorganization of the Latvian Chess Union, but upon his return, he was not permitted to join the organizational efforts.

Vladimirs Mikhailovich brought some proposals from Leningrad. The first was to play a correspondence match between Leningrad and Riga or hold a tournament of the city trade unions. The second, immediately after the Baltic Team Championship, was to organize a 20-board match between Leningrad and the joint team of the Baltic republics. Nothing of the sort happened, however. Petrovs was pushed aside... He quickly realized what was expected from him in political and social life in Soviet Latvia. He was just confronted with the fact that the direction of chess development was already approved by the new leadership.

But he was only barred from organizational work. Petrovs still continued to play in all tournaments of the Latvian republic, but... in parallel with work. The first Latvian SSR Championship was held in the building of the Riga Exchange. As Petrovs told the press, he and the Riga master L. Dreibergrs made a huge sacrifice by taking part in such a serious competition without taking leave from their main job. Dreibergrs was a chemical engineer and got to the tournament straight from the factory. And Petrovs came to the tournament straight from the registry office, where he worked as a deputy manager. Of course, nobody could expect great sporting achievements in such circumstances. Moreover, Volodya himself treated this event as mere

training, and when he finally pulled himself together, it was too late. We should also remember that Petrovs had to carry out some serious theoretical work as well: he analyzed the games of the 12th Soviet Championship for Levenfish's book. This obviously affected his play in a negative way, and he only took 4th place.

In 1941, Vladimirs Petrovs became the chess column editor in the most popular Latvian magazine, *Atputa*. There was an interesting line of succession there: the first editor, right until his death, was Hermanis Matisons (the first Latvian master); after him, Fricis Apsenieks (the second Latvian master) worked as the editor until he succumbed to an incurable disease; and, finally, Vladimirs Petrovs (the third Latvian master) took up the reins for a short time.

In May 1941, soon after Punga's arrest, Petrovs was invited to the Soviet Championship semi-final in Rostov-on-Don. Either he had some premonition or was just anxious because of the latest events, but he didn't want to go. One of Volodya's female colleagues in the registry office told me that as well. I couldn't go with him because I had to take state exams, and so fate had it that he went alone. My husband said his goodbyes for ages, instructing me to watch my health, not to get too tired, and to take care of our daughter. I look in the window, watching him get in the car; then he suddenly returns and asks me to give him a tennis racket – to challenge Keres, he said. He kisses us, makes the sign of the cross with a big golden crucifix which he always wore on his chest, takes my photo with the infant Marina with him, says goodbye and leaves. Leaves forever... His last words to me were, "Just wait, I'll be back, and you'll already have your master's degree. Don't try to celebrate without me! We'll do it together. Wait for a big gift..." He never came back home. War tore us apart...

Curse this year, 1941! My family was devastated that year, the start of suffering and sorrows.

The Rostov-on-Don semi-final was about halfway through. Decisive battles were ahead. The morning of



My photo with baby Marina, which Volodya took with him and which I got back 56 years later