

Evgeny Vasiukov
Chess Champion of Moscow

Alexander Nikitin

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MY VASIUKOV

During my career, I got to meet many stars of the chess kingdom. In my teenage years, I encountered Boris Spassky, Mikhail Tal and Lev Polugaevsky in youth tournaments. Later, I learned the art of coaching from Mikhail Moiseevich Botvinnik and Tigran Vartanovich Petrosian. But chronologically, Evgeny Vasiukov was the first. I met him a lifetime ago, in 1947, at one of the chess lessons in the Moscow Young Pioneers Palace. Evgeny Anufrievich Penchko, who'd replaced his gunfire-smelling overcoat with humble civilian clothing a couple of years before, introduced a slim, shy newcomer to us: "Guys, this is your new colleague. Now, you're going to try and solve Reti's study together with him."

An hour later, as we ate a glazed curd snack and drank a hot beverage which was supposedly "coffee", given to each member of the chess circle, we got to know more about him. He was set to graduate from a vocational school and to go and work as a turner at some factory. He lived with his mother and brother, 8 years his younger. His father had died in the war 4 years earlier — he was an ordnance-truck driver, and his car had hit a mine. Evgeny was two years older than me, and even back then, he rather impressed me with his choices. He did actually graduate from that vocational school at age 15 and did indeed go to work at a factory; he quickly rose in the ranks there and was entrusted with very important jobs. Many of them, however, required surgical precision, and the young master's sight suffered as a result; he had to start wearing glasses. The factory supervisors quickly learned about his chess talents and transferred him from the workshop to the lab, explaining that a lathe machine should be at work constantly, and that it could not stop for a month while its operator went away for some tournament. So the factory supported him, giving him leave to play in Moscow events.

Evgeny Vasiukov didn't waste his free time: he constantly worked on improving his chess skills, often meeting with the great chess teacher and strong master Grigory Ionovich Ravinsky, who imparted him with a fanatical love of chess and a work ethic, which are both necessary to climb the chess Everest. Grigory Ionovich worked with me a little as well, but in 1952, I started to prepare in earnest to obtain a golden medal at school and enroll into college, so our lessons became less and less frequent. In the same year 1952, however, I put in a good performance in the Soviet championship semi-final and was awarded the master's title. The *Pionerskaya Pravda* newspaper even printed a cartoon with our trio in their New Year issue, with the following caption: "His inspiration helped him nurture Vasiukov and Nikitin. Let's hope that Ravinsky trains a true

chess giant.” I decided that Evgeny was the one who should become that giant, though, as I was already planning to take a different path. I was preparing to quit full-time chess for a while.

And indeed, Evgeny soon started defeating Moscow masters, and then grandmasters as well. In 1953, he played a great fighting draw with Viktor Korchnoi. He became a master in 1954, and when he defeated Tigran Petrosian in the 1956 Moscow championship, the young Vasiukov decided that if other non-essential pursuits distract him from chess, he should cut those “other” pursuits from his life. He didn’t hesitate when he made that choice: life didn’t give him any reason for doubt. And so, in 1956, Evgeny Vasiukov became a chess professional.

Officially, “chess player” was not an occupation in the USSR, and all our grandmasters at the time either worked in non-chess areas, like Mikhail Botvinnik (there were very few of them, however), studied in colleges or were officially employed as chess instructors in colleges or sports societies, despite not actually training anybody. In that way, they received financial support from the State Sports Committee that allowed them to lead a modest life, and were occasionally allowed to travel abroad for chess tournaments. These rare “business trips” gave some additional income to grandmasters, which, however, was heavily taxed. Because of the “iron curtain”, a Soviet citizen couldn’t go abroad on their own accord. Inside the country, Soviet chess professionals could earn money by giving simultaneous displays, lectures and lessons at factories, in schools, recreation parks, colleges, numerous Young Pioneers Houses and chess clubs (strictly by permission).

In the early 1950s, Vasiukov got some small support from the workers’ groups of the Trud voluntary sports society. Then the army took him under its wing, and he started playing for army teams.

The young, well-built, tall and handsome man with quite a bit of free time on his hands inevitably got attention from the fairer sex. When you’re in your twenties, it’s hard to resist that kind of attention (and who wants to?), so chess work was somewhat hindered. And while Vasiukov’s chess successes grew, their rate wasn’t as high as, say, Garry Kasparov’s or Anatoly Karpov’s at the same age. Then again, Vasiukov didn’t have such strong support or influence of wise people who could teach him so much and distract him from all that was unnecessary, as they had. He lived in a different environment and was essentially a self-made man.

By the time he was aged 40, he had gained the reputation of a strong and experienced player. Winning the Moscow championship six times (1955, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1972 and 1978) in fierce competition with Moscow grandmasters was certainly no joke; he played in the Soviet championship numerous times as

well. In 1961, after a short surge of success in Belgrade (+7–0=4) and Moscow (+7–3=10), he was awarded the USSR grandmaster title, but then, everything went quiet for a while. Unfortunately, Vasiukov never qualified for the world championship cycle – our other grandmasters were too strong. He was never invited to the Soviet national team for the Chess Olympiads. His successes were obviously incommensurable with his potential and immense chess talent given to him at birth.

Alas, to prepare intensively for elite competitions, money was always needed – to pay coaches, sparring players, for individual training camps, better food, etc. Karpov and Kasparov received their money from sponsors and tournament prizes. Vasiukov's means were much more modest, and so he had to take any chess-related work available to earn money. I think that working as a coach in countries whose chess level was fairly low at that point (Mongolia, Iran, Turkey) hurt Evgeny Andreevich's chess career. I know, both from my own experience and that of some of my colleagues, that coaching work, especially with novice players, changes the coach's thinking if they still remain an active player: instead of searching for something new, they start trying to explain what's already known or devote their time to gathering and thoroughly processing information necessary for their pupils.

The pinnacle of Evgeny Vasiukov's chess successes was his stunning win at the incredibly strong international tournament in Manila, the capital of the faraway Philippines, in August 1974. He arrived together with Tigran Petrosian to compete with a field of the world's strongest stars at the time, such as Bent Larsen, Lajos Portisch, and Svetozar Gligoric; all in all, there were 13 strong players and one local master. There was no real competition for first place. Vasiukov immediately took the lead and won the tournament two points ahead of the runner-up Gligoric. There was a lot of praise, someone even talked about a newcomer in the world chess elite; however, the hype subsided three months later, after a very strong USSR Championship where the hero of Manila ended in the lower half of the table after a poor finish. I can't help but remember a performance of a young, unknown novice at a very strong international tournament in Yugoslavia. The esteemed Tigran Petrosian travelled to the small town of Banja Luka accompanied by a young Garry Kasparov, known to only a very few in the chess world. It was only rumoured that a new talent was growing. Petrosian's authority on his own was probably not enough to secure an invitation for the young master, but Mikhail Botvinnik, who started working seriously with Garry at that point, literally pushed him through all the hoops. Botvinnik's authority was equal to having an extra queen in a quiet position, and so Garry was allowed to play. Some participants, fearing for their rating, threatened to quit the tournament, but

ultimately nobody had the guts. The entire chess world was stunned when, after 10 rounds, the young debutant had made only one draw, with Petrosian, and won all the other games; his live Elo rating surpassed Fischer's! But here, the tournament fates of our heroes diverged. After Banja Luka, Kasparov finished third in the USSR Championship, earned a grandmaster norm and got included in the Soviet national team for the European Championship, where he performed well. So, Garry literally flew into the ranks of the world chess elite.

Evgeny Vasiukov found peace and a stable environment in 1982, in his third (and last) marriage with Evgenia Nikolaevna, a medical practitioner. Soon they had a daughter, beloved by both parents who had found new happiness in life. They made an effort to help her adapt in our quickly-changing world, and these efforts have paid off. Elena Evgenievna is now a successful advertising producer.

Evgeny Andreevich stayed in the memory of many chess fans as a brilliant, elite-level grandmaster who understood the position very well, a fearless fighter who loved to attack and knew how to create attacking motifs. When he seized the initiative and saw the goal, he was a threat to anyone. His opening preparation was built around studying unusual lines and finding new ideas in them, making his opponent think more for himself. As the years went by, he turned from a chess spitfire into a cunning boa constrictor, patiently waiting for his prey. His last games, contained in this book, confirm that.

But I think that Evgeny's greatest achievement was not even one of his flashes of brilliance at the chess board, but rather belonged to his organizer's ability – further proof of Vasiukov's multi-faceted inborn talent. After 60, we all constantly feel the need to talk with our friends and former colleagues. I was glad just to see them and make small talk, play some games, with or without a clock. Evgeny Andreevich gave me that opportunity when he found a place for such meetings – Vladimir Dvorkovich's Chess Lounge.

He took the reins of the veterans organization when it was eking out a miserable existence. Using his authority as a grandmaster and multiple-times Moscow champion, he managed to improve the operations of the veterans commission to the point when it became the best public commission in the whole of the Russian Chess Federation. Vasiukov, together with Evgeny Alexandrovich Bebhuk, started to actively popularize a new form of chess competition – handicap tournaments, where any amateur got the opportunity to play against a grandmaster and even had some winning chances because of the handicap. Evgeny Andreevich developed comprehensive rules for organizing and rating such tournaments, and they became very popular even outside Russia. Veteran players were able to take part in international tournaments, including European

and world championships. Our national veterans team, led by Vasiukov, was the strongest in Europe in the year of Evgeny Andreevich's death.

I especially value this area of organizational work, created and strengthened by Evgeny Vasiukov, and I consider him a supergrandmaster-level chess organizer. We will be feeling his passing for a long time yet.

That's how *my* Vasiukov has remained in my memory.

WHEN IT'S TOO LATE TO DRINK BORJOMI⁴

No 16. Pirc Defense B08

EFIM GELLER – EVGENY VASIUKOV

Kislovodsk 1968

The Odessa grandmaster Efim Petrovich Geller learned chess from his father, a big fan of the game. However, as a boy, he liked to play by his own rules, and he only started studying real chess when he signed up to a chess circle in the Young Pioneers Palace at the age of 13. Kind of late by today's standards – now there are 12 year-old grandmasters in the world. But chess “infected” him once and for all. After a year of studies and playing in qualifying tournaments, he earned first category. The war and army service at frontline airfields impeded his chess progress. However, studying in the economics department of Odessa University did not.

Geller quickly rose in the ranks of Ukrainian chess players and became a Candidate Master at age 21. With this title, he won the USSR championship semi-final in 1949, and the only reason a Candidate Master didn't play in the final was because the qualifying committee reacted quickly and awarded him the master's title two weeks before the tournament. But he could have been a master for quite a short time as well, had he defeated Ratmir Kholmov in the last round of the 17th USSR Championship to become the Soviet champion. He won that title six years later by winning the 23rd edition, with an elite field that lacked only Mikhail Botvinnik. Between the early 1950s and early 1970s, Geller was quite successful on the world chess scene: he played in the Candidates' six times, sharing 2nd–3rd at the 1962 Candidates' Tournament and reaching the semi-final of the Candidates' Matches.

Privately, Efim Petrovich was a very humble and amiable man. He knew well where he stood, but never flaunted his successes as proof of his exceptionality. He was a maximalist, always searching for the best move, playing only for a win, and he was very sure of his chess strength. His best games (and he'd had a lot of them) stunned people with their freshness, interesting ideas, and beautiful and powerful attacks. My copy of the “Black Series” book about Geller with a moving handwritten dedication to that copy's owner written by the man himself is one of my favorite chess books.

Several years later, the players in this game would become Anatoly Karpov's coaches, helping him in matches against Viktor Korchnoi and Garry Kasparov.

⁴ A popular brand of mineral water

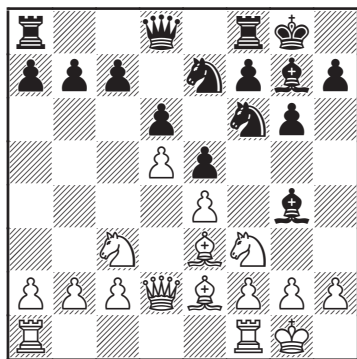
1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 g6 4.♘f3

“White often plays 4.f4 in the Pirc, trying to gain control over the center with pawns. Grandmaster Geller preferred calm development, with White gaining a solid pawn center.” (E. Vasiukov)

4...♗g7 5.♗e2 0-0 6.0-0 ♗g4 7.♗e3 ♘c6 8.♖d2 e5

“This move, closing off the ‘King’s Indian’ bishop, is necessary for Black.” (E. Vasiukov)

9.d5 ♗e7



One of the mysterious, rich positions that attract players’ attention even in the modern computer era.

10.a4

White launches his queenside operation. He needs to act quick, lest his king gets checkmated.

A good alternative is the solid 10.♖ad1; I would like to show you a couple of fragments from supergrandmaster-level games.

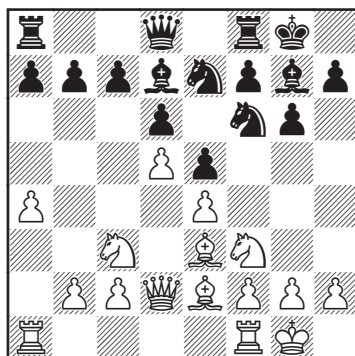
10...b5 11.a3 a5 12.♗xb5! (12. b4?! axb4 13.axb4 ♖a3! 14.♗g5?! ♖xc3! 15.♗xf6 ♗xf3 16.♗xf3 ♖a3 17.♗xg7 ♗xg7 18.♖a1 ♖a8= Karpov

– Azmaiparashvili, 1983) 12...♗xf3 13.gxf3 ♖c8 14.♗e2 ♘h5 15.♘b5 ♖d7 16.♗h1 f5 17.♖c3 ♖fc8 18.♖g1±;

10...♗h8 11.a4 a6 12.♗g5 ♖e8 13.♘e1 ♗xe2 14.♖xe2 ♘h5 15.♘d3 Balashov – Tsheskovsky, 1976.

10...♗d7

Several years after winning this game, Vasiukov himself tried to improve upon it... as White, but his opponent played well, and he didn’t achieve much: 10...♗c8 11.♘e1 ♘d7 12.a5 a6 13.♘d3 f5 14.f3 (14. ♗g5!? f4 15.f3 h6 16.♗xe7 ♖xe7 17.♘a4 g5 18.♘f2 h5 19.c4 ♖f6 20.♖fc1 ♖g6 21.b4 ♘f6 22.c5 g4 23.cxd6 ♖xd6±) 14...♘f6 15.♖fb1 (15.g3 ♖f7 16.♘f2 ♗d7 17.b4 ♖f8=) 15...♗d7 16.♖a3 ♗h8 17.♖b3 ♖c8 18.♗h1 c6 19.♘f2= Vasiukov – Parma, 1974.



For lovers of statistical curiosities: I found this position in seven games in the database. In all seven games, White’s 11th moves were different! But the result was always the same: 0–1. Moreover, the

first line of my Stockfish (11.♔g5, with evaluation +0.29/30) didn't occur in any of those games! This tells you a thing or two about the computer's advice and human and engine approach to calculations and position evaluation.

11.a5 a6

"Black thought it necessary to stop the further movement of the a5 pawn and retain the elasticity and solidity of his queenside pawn chain." (E. Vasiukov)

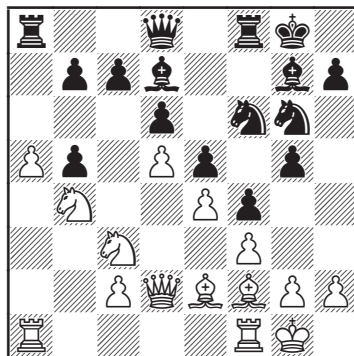
12.♘e1 ♘h5 13.♘d3

At any resort tournament (the tournament took place in the spa town of Kislovodsk), many players who are already past their period of furious youth, when you want to prove something to everyone, go for calmer positions at the chess board. So, no wonder that even such an active player as Efim Geller went for slower piece maneuvering, while his younger adversary, seeing White's plan, started preparing a kingside attack.

13...f5 14.f3 ♘f6 15.b4 f4 16.♔f2 g5

"Both sides have definite plans: White, weakening his opponent's queenside by provoking him to move the a7 pawn, started to play for an initiative on that side of the board, while Black prepared to storm the opposing king's castle. So, who's going to be faster and stronger?" (E. Vasiukov)

17.b5 axb5 18.♘b4 ♘g6



19.♘xb5?

The knight's detour to the queenside looks dubious. The position quickly becomes alarming for White. Other lines come to mind:

19.a6 bxa6 20.♘xa6 g4 21.♘b4 g3 22.hxg3 ♖xa1 23.♖xa1 fxg3 24.♔xg3 ♘h5 25.♔e1 ♔f6!, and then (of course, if you're still able to calculate at that point): 26.♔xb5 ♔g5 27.♖e2 ♔xb5 28.♘xb5 ♘hf4 29.♖f1 ♔h4 30.♘d3 ♘h5 31.♔xh4 ♖xh4 32.♘xc7 ♘g3 33.♖e1 ♖h1+ 34.♔f2 ♘xe4+ 35.♖xe4 ♖xa1= or 19.♔xb5 – White should immediately try to exchange the light-squared bishops in the Bayonet Attack system.

The winner agrees with me here: "19.♔xb5 was worth considering, to weaken my opponent's attack." For instance, 19...g4 20.a6 bxa6 21.♘c6 ♖e8 22.♔xa6 ♔xc6 23.dxc6 ♘e7 24.♔b5 ♖g6 25.♖xa8 ♖xa8 26.♔h1 ♔h8 27.♔h4 ♖h5 28.♔xf6 ♔xf6=.

19...g4

It's too late to drink Borjomi, even in Kislovodsk. The attack commences.

20.c4

Geller's Olympian calm is unbelievable. There's a storm gathering around his king, and he finds time to care for his backward c2 pawn. But what more could he do? The price of his unwillingness to trade the light-squared bishops becomes clear in the line 20.♔h1 g3 21.♙g1 ♘h4 22.♚e1 ♙h3 23.hxg3 ♙xg2+ 24.♔h2 fxg3+ 25.♚xg3 ♘h5 26.♚g4 ♘f4 27.♙f2 ♚f6!#. The winner is diplomatic here as well: "It would be harder for Black to continue the attack after 20.a6, even though his threats would still be quite dangerous and painful. Black could choose his way to win between the calm 20...bxa6 and the sharp 20...g3 in accordance with his tastes and mood."

20...g3! 21.hxg3

My Stockfish recommends the unconvincing 21.♚fb1, hinting at the narrow path that allows the White king to crawl to c1. But its evaluation is -2.00, which destroys White's will to play on.

21...♘h5!

"Black succeeds in his plans. With his two last moves, he has created a concrete threat to the White king. For the attack to be successful, he needs to control the g3 square." (E. Vasiukov)

22.♚e1 ♙h6

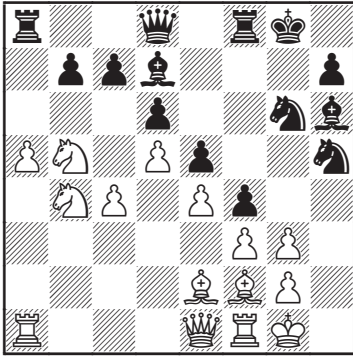
This small stumble changes nothing in the overall way to victory, but "negates" the exclamation mark awarded by the winner to his next



Efim Geller and Evgeny Vasiukov

move. After 22...♘xg3 23.♙xg3 fxg3 24.♚xg3 ♘f4 25.♖f2 ♖f6 26.♚g5 ♘h3+ 27.gxh3 ♖g6 White should resign.

“The Black bishop threatens to join the fray.” (E. Vasiukov)



23.g4?

It was perhaps better to take on f4, retaining at least the illusion of control over the dark squares.

23...♘g3!

Now, White is forced to exchange his bishop for that knight, leaving his fortress basically defenseless. The final attack ensues.

24.♙xg3 fxg3 25.♚xg3 ♙e3+ 26.♙h1

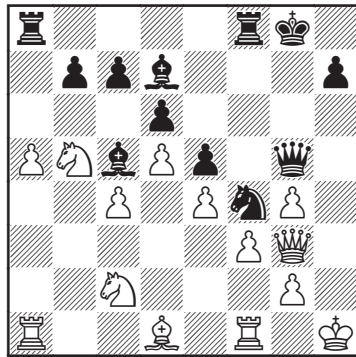
The exchange sacrifice 26.♖f2 ♘f4 27.♙f1 ♙c5 28.♘d3 ♘xd3 29.♙xd3 c6! 30.♘c3 ♖xa5 etc. only allows White to prolong his death.

“In this situation, getting the rook to the h-file is enough for Black to win, and he achieves that with the following maneuver.” (E. Vasiukov)

26...♘f4 27.♙d1 ♙c5

Black is in complete control. The winner starts looting the castle.

28.♘c2 ♚g5



The Black pieces have blocked off all escape routes for the king. The executioner is getting ready to arrive by the route ♖f8-f6-h6.

The rest is simple. There followed:

29.♚h2 ♖f6

The knight escaped to c2 to save its life, but now the White queen falls.

30.g3 ♖h6 31.gxf4 ♖xh2+ 32.♙xh2 ♚h4+ 33.♙g2 ♙xb5

White finally resigned. He can't avoid checkmate after 34.cxb5 exf4 35.♖h1 ♚g3+ 36.♙f1 ♚f2#