

Vasily Smyslov

Volume I

The Early Years: 1921-1948

Andrey Terekhov

**Foreword by
Peter Svidler**

**Smyslov's Endgames by
Karsten Müller**



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Vasily Smyslov
Volume I
The Early Years: 1921-1948

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Introduction

Vasily Vasilievich Smyslov (1921-2010), the seventh world champion, had a long and illustrious chess career. He played close to 3,000 tournament games over seven decades, from the time of Lasker and Capablanca to the days of Anand and Carlsen. From 1948 to 1958, Smyslov participated in four world championships and mounted the toughest challenge to the great Mikhail Botvinnik. Smyslov and Botvinnik played over 100 games (about 10% of all games that Botvinnik ever played in official competitions!) and their rivalry was one of the primary intrigues of the chess world in the 1950s. Smyslov finally became the world champion in the third attempt in 1957, but lost the title in the return match with Botvinnik the following year.

Smyslov continued playing at the highest level for many years and made a stunning comeback in the early 1980s, making it to the final match of the candidates cycle. Only the indomitable energy of 20-year-old Garry Kasparov stopped Smyslov from qualifying for another world championship match at the ripe old age of 63!

Smyslov retained his grandmaster class well into his 70s. In the end, it was his failing health (in particular, his deteriorating eyesight) that forced Smyslov to abandon practical play. In the last years of his life, Smyslov returned to his childhood passion, chess composition, and composed over 100 studies.

And yet Smyslov is arguably the least known of all world chess champions, despite his many achievements. It is tempting to ask oneself, why did Smyslov remain a mystery?

Perhaps the primary reason for Smyslov's relative obscurity was his character. Smyslov was a reserved and deeply private man who did not strive for the spotlight. He was highly competitive at the board but did not dominate the conversation away from it. Smyslov wielded a lot of influence, but preferred staying in the background, being somewhat of a "gray cardinal" of latter-day Soviet chess.

Another factor was Smyslov's playing style, which was classical and logical but not necessarily flashy. To make a comparison, both Smyslov and Tal were world champions for only one year, but Tal won millions of fans for his dashing style and remains an iconic figure to this day, whereas Smyslov's popularity largely waned after the period when he held the championship.

It is not just the amateurs who are oblivious to Smyslov's legacy. In 2004, Hikaru Nakamura gave an interview to Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, which had the following exchange (*The Day Kasparov Quit*, pp. 315-316):

[Nakamura]: There are a lot of these top people who read about the previous world champions, and those before that really got good. I haven't done that. I have studied some of Fischer's games and of course Kasparov's games, which are probably the only two players I have studied.

[DJtG]: *We show you a nice Smyslov's game and you would not have a clue...*

[Nakamura]: *(Laughs) Probably not.*

[DJtG]: *Do you see this as a gap in your education?*

[Nakamura]: *I don't think it really matters. Some of the world champions' contributions were good, some of them, such as Capablanca and certainly other ones, but some of them I don't think have had that much of an impact on the game...*

[DJtG]: *Such as...*

[Nakamura]: *Well, like Smyslov for example.*

[DJtG]: *His endgames...*

[Nakamura]: *His endgames are good, but basically... I have seen some of his games, not as many as say Fischer's or Kasparov's... they seem kind of boring.*

Many of Smyslov's victories indeed look simple, but their simplicity is deceptive. Kasparov reflected on the power of Smyslov's play in *My Great Predecessors* (Part II, p. 263):

...[Smyslov's] victories at the peak of his career are amazing for the lack of a clear defense for his opponents, and a careful study reveals that no one in the world could withstand Smyslov's very fine technique. His credo was as follows: "I will make 40 good moves and if you are able to do the same, the game will end in a draw." But it was precisely this "doing the same" that was the most difficult: Smyslov's technique was ahead of his time.

Kasparov also quoted another world champion's opinion of Smyslov:

[His] innate sense of harmony has helped Smyslov to break all records for chess longevity: in 1983 he reached the final candidates match and later he successfully competed in events right to the end of the century. This phenomenon was wittily explained by Spassky: "Vasily Vasilievich has an incredible intuition, and I would call it his 'hand' – that is, his hand knows on which square to place every piece, and he does not need to calculate anything with his head."

Vladimir Kramnik, incidentally one of the few world champions whom Smyslov did not meet at the board, also held the seventh world champion in the highest regard (quoted from the interview by Vladimir Barsky for the e3e5.com site, January 17, 2005):

Smyslov is... how to say it better... the truth in chess! Smyslov is a player who plays very correctly, truthfully, with a very natural style. Why, by the way, isn't there any kind of mystic aura around him, like there was around, say, Tal or Capablanca? Because Smyslov is not an artist in chess, his style is not artistic or striking. But I like his style very much. I

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would recommend studying Smyslov's games to children who want to learn chess. Because he was playing as it must be done; his style is the closest to some virtual "chess truth." He was trying to play the strongest move in any position, and it is possible that in the sheer amount of strongest moves, he surpassed many other world champions. As a professional, I appreciate that. I know that amateurs are more interested in mistakes, ups and downs. However, from a purely professional point of view, I think that Smyslov is clearly underrated.

He got all components of his playing to a very high level. Smyslov was a brilliant endgame player, and his games sometimes looked like songs. When I browse through his games, there is an impression of lightness, as though his hand is making the moves by itself, and the man does not strain himself at all, as if drinking coffee or reading a newspaper at the same time! Almost a Mozart-like lightness! No strain, no tension, everything is simple, but brilliant.

And yet, despite all the praise by the world champions, one would hardly find any books about Smyslov, other than those that Vasily Vasilievich wrote himself. Smyslov's books are brilliant and his *magnum opus*, *Letopis' shakhmatnogo tvorchestva* (Smyslov's *Best Games* in the English translation), deserves careful study. However, his annotations were written in a different era. Smyslov wrote laconically and often left large chunks of his games without any commentary at all.

He was also prone to ignoring mistakes or stronger defenses, as he preferred the games that were "clean" and "logical," and the extra complexity was taking away from that narrative. As a result, Smyslov consciously excluded many games that were interesting and full of fight, as it usually meant mistakes for both sides or drastic changes in the evaluation. Finally, Smyslov's books included few biographical details, being mostly about the chess and offering little insight about the man behind the board.

A few years ago, I decided to write a book that would fill in these blanks. Initially, it was conceived as a traditional best games collection, interspersed with a few biographical details. However, it quickly became apparent that Smyslov's long chess career cannot be covered in a single volume. I amassed an extensive library of books, tournament bulletins and magazines which cover Smyslov's chess career from the 1930s onwards. I also kept unearthing new material, including Smyslov's manuscripts and letters.

Most of the sources that I used were in Russian, although I also made liberal use of books and magazines in English and German, and occasionally in other languages. I used the existing translations of these sources into English whenever they were available. The rest of the texts I translated myself. The transcription of Russian names into the Latin alphabet is a tricky endeavor, so I relied on the transcriptions from Jeremy Gaige's *Chess Personalia*.

Over time, this book evolved into a multi-volume series, with the first volume covering the early years of Smyslov's chess career, from 1935 to 1948. It will be followed by a second volume that will track Smyslov's ascent from "vice champion" (1948) to world champion (1957). Additional volumes would be required to cover

the rest of Smyslov's career, spanning from mid-1957 to his last tournament games and chess studies that were composed already in the 21st century.

In terms of games, I was striving to present a complete picture by giving the annotations by Smyslov and other contemporary commentators, incorporating corrections that were found in the years that followed, and finally augmenting it with the findings of the present-day, computer-assisted analysis.

My ultimate goal in annotating Smyslov's games was to get as close to the objective truth as possible, essentially continuing his own quest for the ultimate logic and harmony in chess. It needs to be said that this is not purely mathematical "truth," as is sought, for example, by present-day correspondence chess players. Obviously, such unreasonably high standards should not be applied to a practical game, as there are natural limits to what humans can see at the board with a clock ticking. These limits have been significantly expanded in recent decades, as human players have started to learn not only from each other, but also from computer engines, but these limits are there and will never go away.

The computer-assisted progress in our understanding of chess leads to an inevitable cycle of revising and updating commonly accepted knowledge, including the annotations to the games of past masters. However, any updates or corrections, whether large or small, should not detract from our appreciation of the great players of yesteryear, who had to rely solely on their own knowledge and analytic abilities. To paraphrase Isaac Newton, if we see farther, it is only because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Smyslov's annotations – like his games – stand the test of time. His explanations of the strategic plans or the turning points of the game are as clear and educational today as they were when they were written. Smyslov did not pepper his commentary with long and complicated variations, but he almost never missed small tactics. Because of his instinctive positional talent, the tactics always seemed to work in Smyslov's favor and helped him in the execution of longer-term strategy.

Smyslov did not like computers and never used them himself, but he appreciated the role that they could play in figuring out the riddles of chess. It is in this spirit of seeking the truth and with great respect and humility that I tried to update Smyslov's annotations for the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the support of many amazing people whom I encountered throughout my life. I will mention a few who made the biggest contribution to my own chess education, or helped in the last few years as I was writing this book:

- My wife Olga and our children Kristina and Maxim – for tolerating my absences in the evening and on the weekends while I was writing this book, and for having to endure the random facts about Vasily Smyslov for many years.
- My parents, Andrey Sr. and Galiya, for supporting my early interest in chess and allowing me to spend a large part of my childhood playing in tournaments instead of regular school studies.

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- My grandfather Hamza, who learned chess on his own and played countless matches with me during summer school breaks. We probably played more games with each other than Smyslov played with Botvinnik, and it meant a lot to me.
- The chess coaches of my youth – candidate master Vladimir Utkin, master Alexander Shashin, IM Alexey Yuneev and IM Viacheslav Osnos. I did not realize how fortunate I was with until many years later. I did not achieve as much as I should have, given all the knowledge that was invested in me, but I did learn a lot from my coaches – not only about chess but also about life.
- Yury Fominykh, the heir of Vasily Smyslov, who gave me access to Smyslov’s personal archives, including his manuscripts, letters and photos, and shared many personal stories about the seventh world champion.
- Georgy Hut, who shared a treasure trove of game scores, letters and photos of his uncle Bazya Dzagurov, Smyslov’s childhood friend.
- My Singapore chess friends – CM Olimpiu Urcan, CM Junior Tay, GM Kevin Goh Wei Ming – all of whom were major sources of inspiration for writing this book.
- My friend from Germany, IM Mikhail Fedorovsky, who checked the draft versions of the game annotations and made many important corrections.
- Chess historians and collectors – Leonard Barden (England), Mykola Fuzik (Ukraine), Douglas Griffin (Scotland), Alan McGowan (Canada), Jan Kalendovský (Czech Republic), Vladimir Neishtadt (Russia), Vladislav Novikov (Russia), Sergey Voronkov (Russia) – for sharing enormous amounts of primary material and for endless discussions that helped to shape this book.
- The publisher, Hanon Russell of Russell Enterprises, who believed in this project when it consisted only of a few annotated games from Zürich 1953 and a few sketches about Smyslov’s early years, and then patiently waited for several years for the first volume.

This list is far from being complete. Many more people helped me in one way or another, and it is impossible to mention everyone by name. Thank you all for being with me on this journey.

I hope that this book will shed a new light on the life of Vasily Vasilievich Smyslov and will help new generations of chessplayers to discover the incredible legacy of the seventh world champion.

Andrey Terekhov
Singapore
August 2020

Chapter 2

The Breakthrough Year – 1938

Junior Champion, Candidate Master, Master, Moscow Champion

USSR Junior Championship

In January 1938 Smyslov participated in the national junior championship, which was officially titled “Third All-Union Children’s Tournament.” It was a bi-annual event, with the first championship organized in 1934, and the second in 1936. It was the last year when Smyslov was eligible to participate, as he graduated from school in the summer of 1938.

The tournament was held in Leningrad, at the newly inaugurated chess section of the Palace of Pioneers and lasted from January 2 to 10. The structure of the championship was rather complicated. There were 18 teams representing the largest cities of the Soviet Union, and both personal and team scores were tracked. Each team consisted of four persons: a 16/17-year old, a 14/15-year old, a girl chessplayer and a checkers player. (In the 1930s, chess and checkers were “joined at the hip” in the Soviet Union, with events often running side-by-side, and team competitions usually involving both chess and checkers players. *64* covered both chess and checkers until 1941.) All players were divided into preliminary groups in their respective categories. The winners qualified for the final competition, with their scores from preliminary group carrying over to the final.

Grandmaster Levenfish, who was the Chief Arbiter of the junior championship, mentioned in his article published in the Ukrainian newspaper *Shakhist* (#3/1938) that the tournament was limited to 18 teams and 72 players because it was impossible to squeeze more rounds into 10 days of the January school break. Because of that, the organizers had to turn down a few other cities that were eager to send their teams (Yerevan, Tashkent, Chernigov, Petrozavodsk, etc.)

Smyslov represented Moscow, along with Yury Averbakh, who played in the 14/15-year-old category. Exactly 80 years later, Averbakh recalled in the interview for this book (February 12, 2018) that in 1938 he shared a hotel room with Smyslov during the tournament and that they got along well. Smyslov was somewhat patronizing towards the younger and less experienced second category player. Averbakh explained they were in different “weight categories” at the time, both in terms of chess (Smyslov was already a first category player) and even in terms of their physical appearance – there was a 15 centimeter height difference between them at the time (182 for Smyslov, 167 for Averbakh), and so Smyslov called his younger teammate “a tot.”

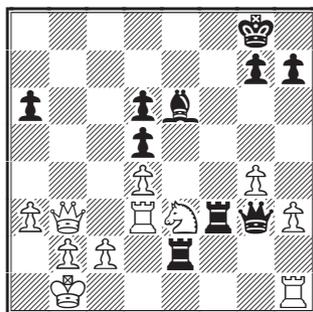
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There were only three first category chessplayers in the competition, all taking part in the competition of 16/17 year olds – Smyslov, Zanozdra (Kiev) and Batygin (Sverdlovsk). The report in *64* also called out Steinsapir (Leningrad) who quickly rose from third category to first. During the tournament he was still listed as second category, but in February 1938 *Shakhmaty v SSSR* already was referring to him as a first category player.

Three or four first category players might not sound like much, but grandmaster Levenfish noted that the level of play in the third Soviet Junior Championship was much higher than in the previous one, and that he was certain that some of the participants would play at master strength in two or three years (*Shakhist*, #3/1938). In fact, Smyslov would earn the master title by the end of 1938!

In the preliminary phase, Smyslov easily crushed the opposition, winning all five games. One of these victories appeared in the report about the junior championship that was printed in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* (#2/1938, pp. 59-62):

Smyslov – Mazanov Third All-Union Children's Tournament Leningrad 1938



Annotations by Alexey Sokolsky and Grigory Ravinsky:

“White won thanks to a striking, although not complicated combination: **26. ♖f5! ♕xf5** After 26... ♖xd3 White mates with **27. ♖b8+! ♗f7** **28. ♖c7+**, etc. **27. ♖xd5+** Not 27. ♖xf3 because of 27... ♕xc2+ **27... ♕e6** **28. ♖a8+!** Stronger than 28. ♖xf3 ♖xf3 29. ♖xf3 ♕d5 **28... ♖f8** After 28... ♗f7, White captures the rook with check. **29. ♖xf8+! ♗xf8** **30. ♖xg3** and Black resigned on the 46th move.”

There was a rest day after the end of the preliminary competitions, but it was just as packed with activities as the game days. There were lectures with the analysis of preliminary rounds by master Ilya Rabinovich, 12 blitz tournaments and simultaneous exhibitions by Leningrad masters and first category players.

Most intriguingly, *64* reports that Botvinnik gave a simultaneous exhibition on 20 boards, with the result +7-4=9. It could have been the first encounter between Botvinnik and Smyslov, but according to Averbakh, the simultaneous exhibition was aimed at the Leningrad schoolchildren, with the championship participants resting before the finals.

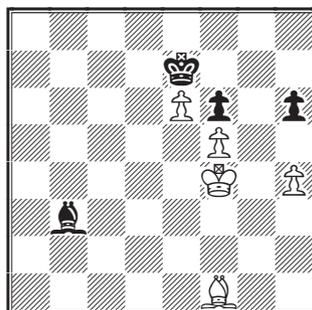


Smyslov playing at the USSR School championship in Leningrad 1938.

They certainly needed a break, for in the final part of the competition the rate of play intensified to two games per day – a decision that was harshly criticized by Sokolsky and Ravinsky in *Shakhmaty v SSSR*. This strenuous format clearly affected Smyslov, as his play in the final was not as convincing. Smyslov drew with Steinsapir and Batygin but lost to Zanozdra in what would be the most famous game of the latter's short chess career. The brief report on the championship that was published in *Shakhist* (#2/1938) mentions that the interest in this game was so high that spectators broke the barrier separating them from the players! This game was later published in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* (#11/1938, p. 494) as an example of Smyslov's underestimating the attacking chances of his opponents.

The endgame of one of Smyslov's two victories in the final was published in 64 (#6/1938):

Smyslov – Lapidus
Third All-Union Children's Tournament
Leningrad 1938



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Annotations by master Ilya Rabinovich:

“Here Black could save the game with 1...♗c2 or 1...♗d1, not allowing White king to get to h5. Instead there followed **1...♗a2?** This leads to a lost position, and is similar to the variation 1...♗xe6? 2.f×e6 ♖×e6 3.♗c4+ ♜e7 4.♖f5 ♖f8 5.♖×f6 h5 6.♖g6 ♜e7 7.♖×h5 ♖f8 8.♖g6.

2.♖g4! ♗×e6 2...♗b1 does not help anymore because of 3.♗h3! ♖f8 4.♖h5 ♖g7 5.e7 ♖f7 6.♖×h6 ♖×e7 (if 6...♗c2, then 7.♗g4) 7.♖g7. **3.f×e6 ♖×e6 4.♗c4+ ♖e7 5.♖h5 f5 6.♖×h6 Black resigned**, as his king cannot make it to h8.”

The fate of the title hung in the balance until the last moments of the tournament. Grandmaster Levenfish wrote in *Shakhist* (#3/1938) that Zanozdra showed inexplicable peacefulness in his last round game versus Steinsapir by agreeing to a draw in a better position – had Zanozdra won this game, he would have become champion by virtue of tying the first place with Smyslov and having better tie-breaks! A few years later Zanozdra quit chess and focused on a medical career, eventually becoming a famous cardiologist and professor.

The way things played out, Smyslov finished clear first with 8 points out of 10, Zanozdra second with 7½, Steinsapir third with 7. For this victory Smyslov received a special prize – an inscribed “Longines” wristwatch from grandmaster Levenfish – that would serve Smyslov well for more than sixty years.

Sokolsky and Ravinsky gave the winner a glowing review (*Shakhmaty v SSSR*, #2/1938, p. 59):

Smyslov is a versatile player, who has a great feeling for position and at the same time does not shy away from combinations. The good knowledge of theory and self-control that he demonstrated in this tournament also contributed to his success. There is no question that if he continues to work on improving his chess, he will grow into a player of high caliber.

We should also note the result of the “boys’ group,” which was won by Smyslov’s teammate Yury Averbakh with 7½ out of 10. This success made the 15-year old Averbakh the youngest first category player in the Soviet Union at the time, the distinction that had previously belonged to Smyslov (64, #7/1938).

Despite the victories by Smyslov and Averbakh, the Moscow team only shared second and third places with Kiev because of the relatively poor performance of the other two players from Moscow. Their checkers teammate Kuptsov finished

1938 All-Union Schoolchildren Tournament

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Final	Prelim	Total
1 Smyslov (Moscow)	*	0	½	½	1	1	3	5	8
2 Zanozdra (Kiev)	1	*	½	1	1	½	4	3½	7½
3 Steinsapir (Leningrad)	½	½	*	0	½	1	2½	4½	7
4 Batygin (Sverdlovsk)	½	0	1	*	½	½	2½	3½	6
5 Sorin (Voronezh)	0	0	½	½	*	½	1½	3½	5
6 Lapidus (Tbilisi)	0	½	0	½	½	*	1½	3	4½

seventh, despite being the only first category player in the competition, while Alexandra Kolesnikova finished 10th in the girls section. The team competition was won by Leningrad, which demonstrated more consistency. Levenfish pointed out that although none of Leningrad players scored better than a bronze medal, all four of them qualified for the final.

Winning the Soviet Junior Championship was a great boost for Smyslov's status in the Soviet chess system. Upon his return to Moscow, he gave a lecture about the competition at the Stadium of Young Pioneers on January 18 and then immediately plunged into new competitions.

Two days after the lecture, Smyslov played against his former roommate Averbakh, on first board of the match between Stadium of Young Pioneers and Palace of Young Pioneers. The ending of this game was published

in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* (#11/1938, p. 492) in an article "Vasya Smyslov" that appeared in the section "Our first category players" by Mikhail Yudovich. The full score of this game has not been published previously, but while doing research for this book it was discovered in Averbakh's archives with his own brief commentary. We will analyze it in more detail (see Game 3).

The First Adult Tournaments

In mid-January 1938, Smyslov was mentioned in *64* (#5/1938) as a member of a chess club at the Moscow Automobile Factory named after Stalin (commonly abbreviated in Russian as "ZIS" at the time). He was brought to the club by his father who worked there as an economist and played in the factory's chess competitions. In April-May 1938, Smyslov Jr. joined his father in the factory championship and won it by scoring $11\frac{1}{2}$ points out of 13 (+10 =3). *Shakhmaty v SSSR* mentioned this in an article about the chess section of the Moscow Automobile Factory (#3/1939, pp. 104-106) noting that Smyslov Jr. did not spare his father, winning the intra-family encounter!

Smyslov also started to play for ZIS in team competitions. In April 1938, *64* reported on the conclusion of the Moscow team semifinals, which lasted for $1\frac{1}{2}$ months. Smyslov played on the third board and ZIS team achieved a considerable success by finishing second in its group and qualifying for the final. It was the only factory team in the finals – all others represented so-called "Voluntary Sports Societies," which united entire industries or professions (e.g., scientific workers,



Smyslov at the USSR School championship in Leningrad 1938.

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construction workers, militia forces, etc.). Later Smyslov joined one such society, “Torpedo,” which brought together the workers of the automobile, tractor and aviation industries.

More importantly, in March 1938 Smyslov started playing in the semi-final of the Moscow championship. *Shakhmaty v SSSR* (#11/1938, pp. 490-491) claims that it was the first individual tournament in which Smyslov played against adult opposition. As 64 pointed out (#18/1938), Smyslov was also the youngest participant in the Moscow semifinals.

The players competed in five different groups, with the winner of each group qualifying for the All-Union Tournament of First Category players and the first two places also qualifying for the Moscow finals. The tournament lasted for more than four months, apparently as a result of poor management – the brief report on the semi-finals in 64 (#37/1938) concluded with a harsh verdict: “Organization of the tournaments by the Moscow chess section should be deemed absolutely unsatisfactory.” However, it did not prevent Smyslov from winning his group with 9 points out of 12, ahead of a first-category player Solomon Slonim and future grandmaster Vladimir Simagin. We will look at one of Smyslov’s victories in this tournament (see Game 4).

Because Smyslov finished first in his group, he qualified both for the All-Union Tournament of First Category players in August and for the Moscow final that was planned for September, though this would be delayed until October 4. Smyslov would go on to win these events as well, and this series of tournament victories would propel him to the elite of Soviet chess.

The Higher Education Quandary

In the summer of 1938, Smyslov graduated from school with distinction. His grades allowed him to enroll in the Moscow Aviation Institute (commonly abbreviated as MAI) without entrance examinations. According to the written



Unknown, Golubovsky, Dzagurov, Smyslov – late 1930s.

15.b4!+-

The attack is now irresistible.

15...♖xc4

The threat b4-b5 forces Black to accept the sacrifice.

16.♖fc1 ♖d5

16...♖xd4?? loses at once: 17.♖xc6+ ♖b8 18.♖c8+. Smyslov also gives the following variation: 16...♖a6 17.b5! ♖xb5 18.♖ab1 ♖a6 19.♖xb7! ♖xb7 20.♖xc6+ ♖b8 21.♖c8+ (there is a quicker mate: 21.♖b6! ♖xb6 22.♖a5! etc.) 21...♖xc8 22.♖a8+ ♖c7 23.♖xa7+ ♖d6 24.♖b4+.

17.♖e2!

17.♖a3?! allows Black to hold out a little longer: 17...♖b5 18.♖xa7 ♖d6.

17...♖d6?!

After this move, White's attack plays itself. From a practical point of view, Black had to try 17...♖xd4 18.♖e3 ♖d6! (Smyslov only mentions 18...♖e5?! in the annotations, when 19.♖xc6+ is more obvious) and then see if White would be able to find the winning variation that involves a double rook sacrifice: 19.♖xc6+! (19.♖xc6 ♖b8! is not so clear-cut, although objectively still winning for White) 19...bxc6 20.♖a6+ ♖c7 21.♖xa7+ ♖c8 22.♖a6+ ♖c7 23.♖c1 ♖b8 24.♖a7+ ♖c8 25.♖xc6+! ♖xc6 (25...♖xc6 26.♖xc6 ♖d1+ 27.♖g2 ♖xc6 28.♖a6+ ♖d7 29.♖b7+ ♖d6 30.♖c5+ ♖e5 31.♖xc6+-) 26.♖a6+ ♖c7 27.♖b6+ ♖b8 28.b5! This looks totally crushing, but in fact it is not completely over yet: 28...♖d7! 29.♖xc6 ♖a3! 30.♖xd7 (things still can go horribly wrong for White after 30.♖a5?? ♖xg3+!! 31.fxg3 ♖c5+ 32.♖g2 ♖a7=) 30...♖xa6 31.bxa6 ♖c5□ 32.♖xc5 ♖c7 33.♖b5+- and White finally wins.

18.b5 ♖b8 19.bxc6 bxc6 20.♖f4

It was already possible to play 20.♖xc6+! ♖xc6 21.♖a6+ ♖d7 22.♖b7+ ♖e8 23.♖xc6+ ♖d7 24.♖c8+ ♖e7 25.♖b4! with mate.

20...e5 21.dxe5 fxe5 22.♖xe5 ♖e8 23.♖xc6+! Black resigned in view of 23...♖xc6 24.♖a6+ ♖d7 25.♖xd6+-.

(5) Smyslov – Rudnev

All-Union First Category Tmt.

Gorky 1938

French Defense [C10]

Smyslov's opponent in this game, Nikolay Rudnev (1895-1944), had a very unusual chess career. He started playing before the 1917 Soviet revolution, won multiple championships of his hometown Kharkov and attained a master title for winning "Hauptturnier B" in Mannheim 1914, the tournament played on the eve of World War I. After 1917 Rudnev moved (or perhaps was deported) to Samarkand, Uzbekistan. He won a Central Asia tournament in 1927 and became a champion of Uzbekistan in 1938.

One might ask why a master was playing in a first category tournament. The answer is that in the 1930s Soviet Union, a master title was not permanent. The most accomplished players were sometimes awarded "Honored Master," which was for life, but the rest of the masters had to confirm their title by performing at the expected level in tournaments. Rudnev lost his master title in 1935 and became a candidate master by winning a first category tournament in 1939. He died in 1944 during World War II.

This game was first published with Smyslov's own annotations (64, #49/1938).

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♖c3 dxe4 4.♖xe4 ♖d7 5.♖f3 ♖gf6 6.♖d3

Smyslov's attack in this game could have been inspired by another game that was played two years earlier: 6.♖g5 ♖e7 7.♖xf6 ♖xf6 8.♖xf6+ ♖xf6 9.c3 0-0

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10.♘d3 ♖e8 11.♖c2 h6 12.0-0-0 c6?
13.h4 ♖c7 14.♗he1 ♘xh4?! 15.♙xh4
♖f4+ 16.♖d2 ♖xh4 17.♗h1 ♖f6 18.f4
♗d8 19.g4 ♗d7? 20.g5+- h×g5 21.f×g5
♖d8 22.♖f4 ♗d5 23.♗dg1 ♘d7 24.g6
f5 25.♗h7 ♖f6 26.♖h2 1-0 Dzagurov-
Ryman, Moscow-Kiev school match
1936. Smyslov was sitting next to his
teammate Dzagurov in that match, so it
is not surprising that he is implementing
a similar plan in this game.

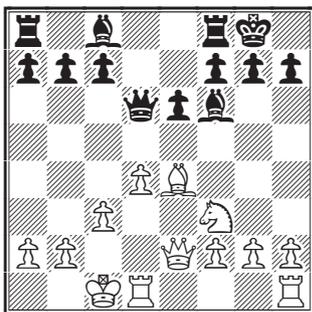
**6...♙×e4 7.♘×e4 ♙f6 8.♘g5
♘e7 9.♘×f6 ♘×f6**

In the earliest annotations Smyslov
criticized this natural move and
suggested that only 9...g×f6?! was
correct, but in later years he conceded
that this evaluation was too harsh. At
the highest levels, 9...g×f6 had only
been played a few times previously:
Marshall-A. Rabinovich, Karlsbad 1911
and a Tarrasch-Mieses match game in
1916. The next time it occurred on a
high level was... in 1995: 10.♖e2 c6
11.0-0 ♖b6 12.c4 ♘d7 13.c5 ♖c7
14.♗fd1 h5 15.♙d2 ♗d8 16.♙c4 ♘c8
17.♖e3± and White quickly won –
Anand-Vaganian, Riga 1995.

10.c3

In the later games White mostly
preferred 10.♖d3!?, preventing Black
from castling short and preparing
White's own long castling without c2-c3.

10...♖d6 11.♖e2 0-0 12.0-0-0±



Smyslov evaluated this position as
better for White, who is better prepared
for an attack on the kingside than Black
is on the queenside. However, this
advantage is temporary in nature. If
Black catches up in development, he
would not be worse thanks to the bishop
pair and good pawn structure.

12...c5

12...♘d7!? is a typical idea for
Black in such positions. By sacrificing
a pawn, Black gets to quickly mobilize
his pieces and create unpleasant
pressure on queenside: 13.♘×b7 ♗ab8
14.♘e4 ♘a4 15.♗d2 c5=

13.♖b1!?

Smyslov is playing rather slowly,
allowing Black to catch up on
development. 13.d×c5 ♖×c5 14.h4!?
deserved attention, with the ideas ♙g5
or g4-g5.

13...c×d4 14.♙×d4 ♖b6 15.f4!?

15.♙b5!?±, preventing the
development of ♘c8.

15...♘d7

Now the position is roughly equal.

**16.♖c2 h6 17.♙f3 ♘c6
18.♘×c6 ♖×c6 19.h4**

Threatening ♙f3-g5.

19...♗fd8 20.♗df1!?

White continues to play for attack
and thus avoids the exchanges. Smyslov
thought that Black does not have
enough time to create counterplay (his
annotations make it clear that he only
considered the b7-b5-b4 plan) but in
fact it was not the case.

20...♖c4?

Black does not find a good way to
parry the g2-g4-g5 threat and thus tries
to simplify into an endgame that looks
only slightly worse at first glance, but
turns out to be difficult.

However, he could strive for more
with 20...♖b5 21.g4 ♗ac8=, when the

best option for White is to seek the simplifications that he just tried to avoid: 22.♖b3 (22.g5? loses to 22...♗xc3+; 22.♞a1?! ♖a5!, with the idea 23.g5 ♗xc3! 24.♖b1 ♖d5! 25.gxf6 ♗xf3=) Black can insist on exchanging on his own terms by playing 22...♖d3+!? (it is also possible to play 22...♖b3 23.axb3 ♗d3 24.g5 ♗xc3! 25.bxc3 ♗xc3 26.♗e5 ♗xb3+ with a perpetual) 23.♖c2 ♖e3! 24.♖c1 (24.g5? ♗xc3+!) 24...♖xc1+ 25.♞xc1 ♗c4 26.g5 ♗d4! and it is White who has to fight for a draw.

21.g4 ♖d3?!

A further error that Smyslov ruthlessly exploits. In his annotations, Smyslov only considered 21...♖xf4? 22.g5 ♗e7 23.♗d4! ♖e3 24.♗f3 ♖e5 25.gxh6→.

It was difficult not to panic, as Black's position looks extremely dangerous. However, with the calm 21...g6!, Black could still defend, for example, 22.g5 (22.f5 is less scary: 22...exf5 23.gxf5 ♖d3 24.fxg6 fxg6 25.h5 g5 26.♗h4 ♖xc2+ 27.♞xc2 ♗g7 and Black survives) 22...hxg5□ 23.fxg5 ♗g7□ 24.h5 gxh5□ 25.g6 f5 and somehow Black is still in the game, although any mistake in such a sharp position would be a final one.

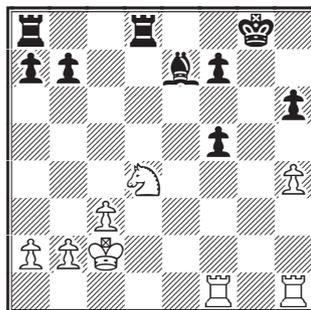
22.g5 ♖xc2+ 23.♞xc2 ♗e7

Smyslov points out a brilliant forced variation: 23...hxg5 24.hxg5 ♗e7 25.♗h3 ♗d6 26.f5! exf5 27.♗fh1 ♞f8 28.♗d4 g6 29.♗e6+!, winning an exchange, since 29...fxe6?? leads to mate: 30.♗h8+ ♞f7 31.♗1h7#.

24.gxh6 gxh6 25.f5!

Damaging Black's pawn structure even further.

25...exf5 26.♗d4±



As a result of his (partially bluff) attack Smyslov has an endgame with a powerful knight and a better pawn structure. The rest of the game showcases his famous technique in converting this advantage into a full point.

26...♗d6 27.♗xf5 ♗e6
28.♗hg1+ ♞h8 29.♗e1 ♗c5
30.♗gf1 ♗ae8 31.♗xc6 ♗xc6?!

After this move, the position remains static and the black bishop turns out to be mostly useless. Black had to do something drastic to get rid of the dominating ♗f5, so 31...fxe6! was the most tenacious defense, with the following illustrative variation: 32.♗xh6 ♞g7 33.♗g4 ♗h8 34.♗e5! (34.♗h1?! ♗h5! and h4-pawn is going to fall anyway) 34...♗h5! 35.♗e1 ♗f2 36.♗e2 ♗xh4 37.♗f3 ♗f6 38.♗xe6 ♞f7± Black is a pawn down but given the limited material he still has some drawing chances.

32.b4 ♗b6?!

It was better to play 32...♗f8, covering the d6- and h6-squares, even if it does not change the overall evaluation of the position.

33.♗d1 ♗f6 34.♗d5 ♗f2
35.h5 b6 36.♞d3 a6 37.c4 ♗c6
38.a4 ♗e1 39.b5

White has achieved complete domination on the light squares.

39...a×b5 40.a×b5 ♖e6?

This loses on the spot. 40...♖f6 41.♗e4 ♖e6+ 42.♖e5 ♖f6 was more stubborn. White is winning after 43.c5 b×c5 44.♖×c5 ♖b6 45.♗d5 ♗f2 46.♖c8+ ♗h7 47.♗d6 ♗g3 48.♖c6!+- but Black could still hope to sacrifice his bishop for both White pawns.

41.♗d6 ♖×d6+ 42.♗×d6 ♗g7

42...f6 43.c5 b×c5 44.b6 ♗a5 45.b7 ♗c7 46.♗f5+- and White wins by marching his king to c8.

43.c5 Black resigned in view of 43...b×c5 44.b6 ♗a5 45.b7 ♗c7 46.♗e8+ ♗f8 47.♗×c7+-.

(6) Smyslov – Lilienthal

Moscow Championship

Moscow 1938

French Defense [C11]

This game is of great historical significance, as it is both Smyslov's first tournament game against a grandmaster and at the same time his first victory over one. The title of grandmaster carried more weight in those days, as there were so few of them, so this upset victory drew a lot of attention worldwide.

Smyslov published his annotations to this game less than two weeks after it has been played, in 64 (#58/1938). As mentioned in the biographical section, a few weeks later world champion Alekhine told Botvinnik that he found a mistake in Smyslov's analysis and apparently Alekhine referred to this game.

Smyslov's opponent in this game, Andor (Andre) Lilienthal was born in Moscow in 1911, grew up in Hungary, but emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1935 and lived there until 1976, when he returned to Hungary. Lilienthal continued traveling from tournament to tournament well into his senior years. In the early 1990s, I saw Lilienthal at

the St. Petersburg Chigorin Club, where he was analyzing the games from the open tournament in which I also played. He was over 80-years old then. Lilienthal passed away a few days after celebrating his 99th birthday, less than two months after Smyslov's death.

In the beginning of their matchup, Lilienthal struggled against the young and quickly improving Smyslov. From 1938 to 1941, Lilienthal lost three games to Smyslov and drew five. However, in the next few years Lilienthal adapted to Smyslov's style and equalized the score at +4 -4 =7. Smyslov scored 3½ points out of their last four encounters from 1947 to 1950, thus bringing the final score to +7 -4 =8 in his favor.

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.e5

This is the most popular move today, but in 1930s it was relatively rare. Most games at the time continued 4.♗g5.

4...♗g8?!

This cannot be a good move, even though there is a certain logic to it. Black is rerouting the knight via g8 to f5, arguing that it would be better placed there than on d7 or c5. However, the loss of time usually outweighs the positional considerations. Most probably, Lilienthal wanted to confuse his young opponent and make him play on his own rather than following theoretical variations. A half-century later, Petrosian and Bronstein also tried this move against lower-rated opponents.

5.♗g4!?

In the spirit of Nimzowitsch! The development scheme started by this move makes more sense with the knight on g8 rather than on d7, as Black cannot create enough pressure on d4- and e5-pawns.

Both Petrosian and Bronstein faced a different and more popular setup for