Learn from Michal Krasenkow

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Key to Symbols used

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⩲	White stands slightly better
⩱	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with an initiative
⇆	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⩑	better is
≤	worse is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate
⩒	with compensation for the sacrificed material

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Foreword

During my chess career I have played almost 4000 classical games, a good deal of them against grandmasters, including world's top players, a number of which I managed to defeat. A lot of these games are interesting and instructive, and studying them will definitely help any player to get new expertise, learn new ideas and therefore improve their chess skill. This book is divided into three chapters. The first part is a brief description of my life and career. The second chapter includes 54 of my most memorable victories grouped by their main contents (tactics, attack, positional play etc.) while in every section games are arranged in chronological order. The third chapter is specifically devoted to endgames and contains analyses of the 12 most interesting, often amazing endgames, I had in my practice.

Some of the games and endings were published (mostly a long time ago) in various chess magazines. All my earlier annotations have been fully revised for this book, with the help of more modern computers and analysing engines. I don't understand the strange approach of some chess commentators (mostly those providing online coverage of games), who decline using chess engines in order to give more "human" commentaries (which leads to numerous mistakes and blunders as they can't fully concentrate on the games in the same way as players do). I don't see any contradiction between human explanation of decisions taken in the games and their verification with technical aids. On top of this, computer analysis often reveals fantastic possibilities hidden in the position, which are as instructive as details of human thinking.

I would like to thank my wife Elena, who supported me very much in my life and chess career.

Enjoy!

Michal Krasenkow
Warsaw, July 2018

Five Decades in Chess

In 1972 an eight-year-old boy, proud conqueror of many of the old gentlemen in Izmailovsky Park, stepped over the threshold of the Moscow Pioneer Palace for the first time. The boy could not predict, of course, that he would one day become a Polish grandmaster. I had already seen a map with the name 'Poland' on it, and I certainly knew the names of world's leading chessplayers and what the grandmaster title meant in those days. Becoming a grandmaster was one of my dreams, but the enchanting world of chess had kidnapped me, whether I achieved it or not. I had never considered - probably wrongly - the goal, the level for which I would have to strive. I just played and moved forward.

I was born Mikhail Azos on November 14 1963 in Moscow. I never knew my father. My mother's parents, Shloma Azos and Anna, née Salganik, were Jews from the Ukrainian town of Radomysl. Under Stalin's rule they had had to move to Kazakhstan (alas, I don't know the details) but finally, at the end of the 1940s, my grandfather, a qualified economist, was transferred to the capital and worked in one of the numerous departments of industry until he retired. My mother Galina worked as an engineer in the Institute of Nonferrous Metals until her untimely death in 1989. It was a usual family of 'Soviet Intelligentsia'. My grandfather and mother belonged to the Communist Party, so they raised me in a spirit of loyalty to the regime. This loyalty was not shaken until my army service.

One day my grandfather, a keen chess player, taught me the rules of the 'royal game', and after some time, as I mentioned above, he took me to the Moscow Pioneer Palace. I was lucky. Chess was one of the few areas of life in which the Soviet Union had real and not just paper achievements. That is why the Communist Party devoted a lot of attention to maintaining that tradition. In Moscow itself there were several training centres for young chess players, in the so-called Houses of Pioneers (centres for developing children's abilities in various fields), sports associations etc. The three strongest chess schools were situated in the Moscow City Pioneer Palace (among those who studied chess there were Artur Yusupov, Igor Glek and Yuri Piskov), in the Sports Boarding School, where talented chess players were gathered from the whole USSR (Evgeny Bareev, Yuri Dokhoian, Alexander Zlochevsky) and at the Young Pioneer Stadium (Andrei Sokolov, Alexei Vyzhmanavin). There were experienced trainers; in addition, the most talented of us had the opportunity to attend one of the grandmasters' schools, named after Botvinnik, Smyslov, Petrosian,

Geller etc., in which the country's leading trainers such as Mark Dvoretsky, Alexander Nikitin and Boris Zlotnik conducted classes at training camps.

There were a lot of individual and team tournaments, for various championship titles and just for chess categories. However we kids played almost exclusively with each other. Open tournaments, in which everyone could face a grandmaster, didn't exist in the USSR. This significantly hampered the progress of young players and is why gaining the title of national master by a junior aged 16-17 was considered an outstanding achievement.

My path to the top was by no means a speedy ascent. My first trainer in the Pioneer Palace was Evgeny Penchko - a colourful, legendary figure, an unusual but outstanding educator of several generations of chess players. It was he who instilled in me the principles of fair play and respect for the opponent. After a year of classes and playing in tournaments, I reached second category. Unexpectedly, those successes were followed by stagnation. For two years I tried unsuccessfully to make first category. Faithfully, several times a week after school, from the age of ten, I made my own, long, way to the Pioneer Palace which was at the other end of town and took over two hours there and back by subway, to play a game or listen to a lecture by the trainer. (For some time I attended the classes of Master Alexander Chistiakov, which, however, did not stick in my memory.) I bought and read chess books, watched the TV Chess School, presented by eminent grandmasters like Alexander Kotov or Yuri Averbakh, but all in vain. In subsequent tournaments, I missed out once by half a point and once by a point or more. Finally I decided to quit chess.

Today I am smarter and know that the development of a talented child often proceeds unevenly. Accumulated knowledge and skills can be hidden under a visible lack of progress for a long time. To reveal them, sometimes only one kick in the right direction is needed. Unfortunately, not everyone gets it in time. I was lucky.

One day in the summer of 1975, I went to the Pioneer Palace to collect my documents. I found a new trainer there, Victor Lublinsky, a well-known master and participant in finals of Soviet Championships in the '40s and '50s. He convinced me to abandon my intentions and sign up for his group. "Well," I thought, "I'll try once more, give it one last chance."

Lublinsky worked in the Pioneer Palace for just one year, but for me that year was a breakthrough. My new trainer was not only accessible and did not just present the basics of chess strategy and tactics, but adorned his stories with numerous

memories and anecdotes from his life. From the years of Victor's youth, Capablanca, Lasker and other outstanding figures of chess history went straight to our souls. Teenagers of the ’70s felt like witnesses to the famous tournaments held in Moscow in 1935 and 1936 or the USSR championships of 1949-50. Here is a story which stuck in my memory (God knows why): Lublinsky played in a tournament against the well-known player Alexander Konstantinopolsky, who had the longest surname among Soviet chess masters (later he was awarded the honorary grandmaster title). The game was adjourned. Older readers probably remember what that procedure involved: one of the players wrote the names of the opponents, the position, and the clock readings on an envelope, and his rival, after due consideration, secretly wrote his next move on his scoresheet instead of making it on the board. Both players’ scoresheets were sealed in the envelope, which was kept in the arbiter's safe till the game was resumed, usually within the next few days. So Victor began to write on the envelope ‘Lublinsky - Kon...’ and suddenly realized that the name ‘Konstantinopolsky’ wouldn’t fit on the line! So he decided to shorten it and wrote ‘Kon-sky’, which means ‘horse-related’ in Russian! When he saw this, his opponent felt terribly offended and did not speak to Lublinsky for a long time.

The group led by Victor (later taken over by Master Eduard Shekhtman) included a number of future grandmasters and international masters: Yuri Piskov, Sergei Sergienko and later Maxim Notkin (nowadays a famous Russian chess journalist). The other students were not so successful in chess but let me mention their names anyway: Gennady Mikhailov, Gennady Shevchuk, Anatoly Boshkin, Armen Stepanian, Leonid Levin, Leonid Edelstein, Alla Kantorovich, Anna Baranova, Olga Orlova and Tatiana Saburova. We are now scattered all over the world, from Israel to Germany and the United States - and I found myself in Poland...

Immediately after beginning classes with Lublinsky, I gained the first category, and at the end of the school year I became the champion of Moscow among pioneers, i.e. under 14 years of age.

In 1976, I moved, along with several colleagues from the Lublinsky group, to another school, which was far from home but close to the Pioneer Palace. Boys and girls who gathered in the school were members of several sport sections of the Palace, so that they could more easily combine learning with practising sports. Indeed, the facility was enormous, although I had to get up before dawn. (Since then I have been more of a ‘lark’ and cannot get used to the ‘owl’ lifestyle.) On a side note, I became an involuntary participant in a certain ‘scam’. Even before we

started attending the new school, the leadership of the Pioneer Palace created a 'school representation', which was entered for the Moscow Pioneers team championship, and after winning it, for the USSR championship (the so-called White Rook tournament). Unfortunately the team which was runner-up in Moscow protested and we were disqualified from the competition. I remember how the manager of our chess section complained to us (who were nearly turned back from the road to the airport!) about the intrigues of enemies who didn't care about the honour of the capital. We won the White Rook tournament a year later and again, without my participation, the following year.

As I mentioned earlier, Lublinsky was replaced after 1976 by Master Eduard Shekhtman, who was once a member of the training group of the former World Champion Tigran Petrosian. Eduard taught me, above all, systematic self-work on chess. I achieved a good level in junior tournaments: twice, in 1978 and 1980, I shared 5th-7th places in the USSR U18 championships (won respectively by Zurab Azmaiparashvili and Jaan Ehlvest). I attended several sessions of the Vassily Smyslov school, where I learned a lot from the ex-World Champion and also from Dvoretsky, Zlotnik, Grandmaster Yuri Razuvaev and other prominent trainers. It was Razuvaev who instilled in me a love for the games and style of the great Polish chess player, Akiba Rubinstein. My love is still there, but my style is very different!

I also started to participate in adult tournaments. In 1977 I became a candidate master. Two of my games from the school period, nos 1 and 11, are included in this book.

In 1980 I graduated from secondary school. I did not intend to be a professional chess player (in fact, such a profession did not officially exist in the USSR) but of course I did not want to part company with the game. My choice of Moscow universities, in which I wished to continue my education, was therefore limited to those containing chess clubs. The direction was clear: mathematics. A strong chess club under the guidance of IM Iosif Vatnikov (including players like Artur Yusupov and Sergei Dolmatov) ran at the Lomonosov University. Of course, I dreamed about getting into the mechanics and mathematics department of the most prestigious university in the whole USSR, but my mother told me, "As a Jew you have no chance. There is an unofficial percentage standard at the main university of the country for Jews!". She decided to resolve this matter, and I received a new Russian surname and entry in the Soviet ID document 'Nationality - Russian'. So now I am known in the chess world as Michal Krasenkow, not Azos, and it is too late to reverse this state of affairs...

Still, to my surprise, despite being a top student at school, I failed the oral exam in mathematics! The examiners (I remember their surnames - Makarov and Shvedov) jumped around the whole course and finally declared that I did not deserve more than the score of 'two' ('unsatisfactory'). I was in shock, but colleagues from my first job later explained to me: "Yes, you have a Russian name and Russian nationality inscribed in your papers but your mother is a Jew, so you are not Russian according to the authorities, only RPD ('Russian by documents') and subject to all unwritten restrictions." My mother's efforts had proved futile.

The next university that attracted me was the Institute of the Petrochemical and Gas Industry. The chess club there was directed by my former coach, Victor Lublinsky, who unfortunately died very early, in 1982. So I joined the Department of Applied Mathematics in that institute for evening studies. I moved to full-time studies a year later, before which I worked as a technician, errand boy and computer operator in a design office. Low-productivity work on obsolete computers, a lot of sitting around drinking tea and conversations on various, sometimes risky, topics - this was my first experience of 'Soviet reality'. The second was to come in a few years' time.

During my studies, chess was put in the background but remained in the field of my activity. Student chess life in Moscow was very intensive. Championship and cup competitions were held amongst the city's universities. Our team, which consisted of strong players like Igor Glek, Yuri Piskov, Sergei Yanovski and others, won them several times, even overtaking 'professionals' from the chess department of the Institute of Physical Culture (Evgeny Bareev, Sergei Kishnev, Alexander Zlochevsky, Aloyzas Kveinys, Valery Yandemirov etc.). In addition, individual championships were held for the student sports association Burevestnik and, of course, there were city championships - quarterfinals, semi-finals and finals. I did not work on chess too intensively, did not play very often and was not very successful. For instance, I never qualified for the Moscow Championship finals, although in 1982 I gained the title of National Master.

The situation changed in 1984 when, on the one hand, I came to the conclusion that I lacked the talent for a serious scientific career, and on the other it became clear that after completing my studies I would probably be enlisted into the army as an officer. In the majority of Soviet universities, including ours, students, along with their regular studies, had military training and subsequently, after passing a military camp and exams, they received the rank of lieutenant. Some of them were later enlisted into the army. And again, the unofficial rule was - avoid calling up Jews! As

there were very few non-Jews in our group, it was not so easy to fill the required quotas, so RPDs like myself had no chance of avoiding this intake!

The only way to make my military service worthwhile was to get into the Army Sports Club and play chess. So the last year of my studies became 'preparatory' for a professional chess career. I started playing tournaments more often and more successfully. Games nos 2 and 3 come from that period.

In June 1985, I defended my master's thesis, and in August I was appointed to the army and came to Georgia, to the Transcaucasian Military District. The unit to which I was directed was located near Batumi, the capital of the autonomous republic of Ajara, and was infamous as the worst unit in the entire Armed Forces of the USSR. The mess reigning in the Soviet Army - the dullness of the commanders (the personification of which was my eternally drunken battalion commander, Major S.), ostentation, corruption - a complete denial of all communist slogans - simply frightened me. Once the company in which I commanded a platoon got the order to put three designated armoured personnel carriers on exercise. Of the nine company transporters, only three were in working condition, but different from those specified in the order. The commander of the company decided to put up the three efficient transporters, but to blur their numbers with mud!

Soon I was transferred to Tbilisi, to the district sports club. My life as a military chess player began. Within two years, I significantly increased my level of play and achieved a number of good results: 2nd-3rd with Giorgi Giorgadze, behind Elizbar Ubilava, and 1st in the Championship of Georgia in 1986 and 1987 respectively; 2nd after Rustem Dautov in Kaliningrad in 1986 and 2nd-3rd behind Alexei Vyzhmanavin in Tashkent in 1987 in the USSR Armed Forces Championship. This last tournament, then the strongest in my career, involved two grandmasters, both of whom I managed to beat, and can safely be called the 'future stars tournament'. All of its participants later gained their grandmaster's epaulettes, among them Vassily Ivanchuk, Alexander Khalifman, Alexander Nenashev (Graf), Rustem Dautov, Alexander Shabalov, Alexander Goldin, Evgeny Pigusov, Alexander Huzman, Igor Glek, Andrei Kharitonov and Leonid Yurtaev.

Although I was a 'hated occupier', I made many friends amongst Georgian chess players. In 1986 I defended the colours of Georgia at the so-called Spartakiade of the Soviet Union. An interesting situation arose in the last match against Lithuania. A 5-0 win, which seemed quite possible in the middle of the round, would have

given us victory in the competition, but we lost 2-3 and came last, in sixth place in the final group!

Games 22 and 49 illustrate the Georgian period of my chess career.

I returned to Moscow in 1987, but there was no way back to mathematics. For several years I worked as a coach in the Tigran Petrosian Chess Club, but above all I played, and it must be said that the director of the club, Yefim Nuz, created the necessary conditions for that.

At the beginning of 1988 I was 3rd= with Alexei Dreev and Alex Shabalov in the so-called Young Masters Tournament, in which the best young players up to the age of 26 from the whole country took part, with the exception of the few grandmasters. Victory in the event was shared by Alex Goldin and Boris Gelfand, and among the participants there were also Khalifman, Vladimir Akopian, Ilya Smirin, Vladimir Epishin, Lembit Oll and Eduardas Rozentalis. Of course all the participants later became grandmasters.

And then in March I made my debut in an international tournament, in Budapest.

The Soviet Union was a tightly closed country, and foreign travel, even to 'socialist countries', was rare. Before that I had been abroad only once, when I took part in a 'scientific and tourist' trip to East Germany as a part of a 'student exchange' in 1984. But 1988 was the beginning of the opening of the USSR's borders and mass travel of Soviet chess players, first to Central Europe, then later to the West.

Obtaining the title of international master was a mere formality, and the title of grandmaster came unexpectedly smoothly. In the January 1989 rating list I found myself amongst the top hundred in the world with a high (for the time) 2525 rating and became a tasty morsel for many tournament organizers. I easily made a grandmaster norm at the tournament in Ptuj in Slovenia, with more difficulty in Budapest (I had to win my last round game with Black against the Danish IM Carsten Hoi), and was then invited to the tournament which took place in the medieval castle of Lillafured. The tournament was organized specially for the famous Zsuzsa (now Susan) Polgar, to give her the best chance of a grandmaster norm, so some of the players invited were clearly weaker than their ratings indicated. As a result a third and last norm was obtained, not by Zsuzsa, but by me.

During that time, I experienced another extraordinary adventure, called 'rapid chess', then more often called 'active chess'. This version of the game had just appeared on the chess scene and immediately became a subject of a fierce conflict in the USSR, then led by Mikhail Gorbachev, between the 'nomenclature' of the Communist Party, which supported Anatoly Karpov, and the democratic forces gathered around Garry Kasparov. In April 1988 I played in the Moscow Active Chess Cup. I treated the competition as pure entertainment, but before the tournament, a certain chess player, unfortunately I do not remember who, gave me some tips. It was excellent advice; I unexpectedly won the competition and qualified for the USSR Cup, which took place in Tallinn in early May. Several dozen famous grandmasters came to that tournament since there was a lot to fight for: the first eight qualified for the 1st European Active Chess Championship, scheduled for the end of May in Gijon in Spain. Meanwhile, two lesser known masters, Leonid Yudasin and myself, won the event. In the very first round I scored a sensational victory against the two-time USSR Champion Lev Psakhis, and then defeated Rafael Vaganian, Adrian Mikhalchishin and Vladimir Tukmakov. Although I lost the play-off for first place, I achieved a success that I could only dream of in classical chess at that time!

Times were changing. Here was Spain! My first time in the West! Several days of bureaucratic scurrying about, reading a terrifying instruction in the Sports Committee, with warnings against possible provocations by Western special services. The KGB officer who gave it to me was very kind. Seeing my frightened face, he smiled and said, "Don't worry! The only thing you must know is that you can get help in the Soviet embassy if necessary." The impressions were incredible but the tournament was a cold shower: I lost the first two games. After that it went much better; I won against several grandmasters, including Florin Gheorghiu, and two victories in the last rounds - against Gyula Sax and once again against Vaganian - brought me 4th-7th= after 1st Karpov, 2nd Tukmakov and 3rd Victor Gavrikov, and an enormous cash prize of 6,500 Swiss francs! True, 20% was immediately taken back by FIDE and 2,000 francs went to the USSR Sports Committee, but I felt rich!

Then the initial World Active Chess Championship was held in Mazatlan in Mexico in December 1988. A decent result, shared 11th-25th (1st Karpov, 2nd Gavrikov), first contact with emigrants from the USSR (Lev Alburt, Igor and Alexander Ivanov), and the Mexican journalist's question, "What is your attitude towards the October Revolution?". What could I say in the mental turmoil of those times? "This is a very important event in the history of the world" - neither in the positive (well, Communism has evidently failed) nor negative (is it decent to scold your country? and deep inside - would too much honesty be a bit dangerous, despite glasnost and

perestroika?). After all, the criminal nature of the whole Soviet regime, not just Stalinism, had not yet been revealed.

In later years I had some more good results in that chess discipline: in 1990, 5th-7th in the tournament of the Grandmasters Association in Murcia (with over 100 grandmasters) and victory in the USSR Cup in Lviv; in 1991, victory in the Cup of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Moscow; in 1996 I qualified for the final part of the very prestigious Kremlin Cup in the Russian capital; in 1997, victory in the Russian Cup, again in Moscow. I also won several rapid tournaments of lesser rank. But I still treat this kind of game as entertainment, a show, a way of advertising chess, and I am definitely against giving titles and counting ratings in rapid chess. FIDE, however, goes in the opposite direction.

At the same time, 1988-89, I took my first steps in a slightly different field of chess activity, journalism. The end of the '80s was a period of so-called 'perestroika' and 'glasnost', when in both the USSR
and other countries of the Soviet bloc, the earliest in Poland, a broad democratic movement was created, with the ultimate aim of eliminating the Communist dictatorship. The struggle for the transformation of the system took place on many fronts, including sports and particularly in chess. One of the most important weapons was the word of a journalist. Everything looked simple. The incarnation of all evil was the State Committee for Sport and its chess department headed by GM Nikolay Krogius, while the mouthpiece of 'chess commies' was the bi-weekly *64 - Shakhmatnoe Obozrenie* (*Chess Review*), edited by Karpov and Alexander Roshal. The banner of democracy and fight for the rights of chess players was held by Kasparov and his companions, including Alexander Nikitin and Evgeny Bebchuk, as well as the editors of the magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR* (*Chess in the USSR*, editor-in-chief GM Averbakh), which brought together great people, real intellectuals like Dmitry Plisetsky (son of the well-known Russian poet German Plisetsky), Sergei Voronkov and others. It is that crew with which I began a cooperation which continued for years, despite all the twists of fate, both mine and that of the magazine. It was later published under various names: *Shakhmatny Vestnik*, *The Chess Herald* and *Shakhmaty v Rossii*, until its collapse at the very end of the last century.

In January 1989, I got married. Lena was one of my students at the Petrosian club, a candidate master. In the same year, our daughter Katia (Kate) was born. Unfortunately we suffered a terrible loss too when my mother passed away in November.

For the first two years after gaining the grandmaster title, I enjoyed freedom. I could travel all over Europe, playing in many open tournaments and earning huge money for the dying USSR. Among the most important achievements of that period, I would like to mention the 1st place in Vienna in 1990, shared with Alex Wojtkiewicz, Gavrikov, Edvins Kengis, Lubomir Ftacnik and Margeir Petursson, and a victory in Gausdal in 1991, shared with Gregory Kaidanov. A lot of GMs took part in those tournaments. Games 4, 5, 23, 24 and 44 are my most memorable creative achievements from 1989-91.

August 1991. I am playing in a small tournament in Borriana in Spain. One sunny day, around dinner time, a wide-eyed bartender nearly jumped at IM Igors Rausis and me: "¡Golpe de estado en la URSS! ¡Tanques en las calles de Moscú! ¡Gorbachov cayó!" ("Coup d'état in the USSR, tanks in the streets of Moscow, Gorbachev overthrown!")

It was not a surprise. In the days before I had been anxiously watching what was happening in my country. But what to do now? Return? And if a wave of terror begins, will borders close and turn the country into a prison? Ask for political asylum? But how to get my family out of there?

I spent two days in shock in front of the TV screen, attempting to understand how things would unfold. I do not know how I could play chess at the same time. Finally, happy news: the coup had been suppressed, the people had won. Several months later the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Before the dissolution of the empire, I managed to make my debut in the final of the USSR Championship. On previous occasions I had had no luck in qualifying, but in 1990, IM Anatoly Bykhovsky, the functionary of the Soviet Chess Federation, suddenly asked me, "Would you like to play in the final of the Union?" "Are you inviting me?", I asked. "No, no, just in case I can put you on the reserve list." I had an invitation to the tournament in Vienna during the USSR Championship, so had to refuse, but in 1991 the final was held on the Swiss system, and all grandmasters were invited to participate. So I played in the tournament, without much success, but at least I marked my 'place in history'.

I visited Poland for the first time in September 1991 for the team championship of the country, in which I played for the Stilon club of the city of Gorzów Wielkopolski. Quite surprisingly, our team won the championship - a feat it repeated five more times in the following years. At that time, the collapsing USSR created more and

more problems for people living there. I had personal problems too, as my family and I found ourselves in a difficult housing situation. I started to look around for possibilities of emigration from 1990. For the head of the Stilon team, Dr Konrad Tolkacz, it was no secret...

In January 1992 I had a bad day. My mood was nasty: my wife and I had just been refused French visas. The embassy officials said that our invitation to the rapid chess tournament near Paris was inappropriate. Then suddenly, a phone call. Konrad Tolkacz was on the line:

“Misha, would you like to move to Gorzów? It’s possible to buy a flat on convenient credit conditions. We'll handle the rest.”

And so I found myself in Poland.

The years 1992-95 were a period of ‘extended removal’. I lived in Poland for a few months, then for several months in Russia, fewer and fewer every time. I won several strong tournaments, including the Katowice Open in 1992 (together with Sergei Gorelov), and shared first in the Tal Memorial in Moscow the same year with Nukhim Rashkovsky and Sergei Makarychev, an event with the participation of over thirty grandmasters including Khalifman, Epishin and Dolmatov. In 1993 I was 1st= in opens in Metz (with Igor Khenkin and Alexander Budnikov), Pardubice (with Zbynek Hracek, Gennady Tunik, Victor Kuporosov and Leonid Milov) and a category 13 tournament in Las Palmas with Smirin. At the turn of 1993-94, I took second place in the famous traditional tournament in Hastings which John Nunn won. In 1994 I won in Pardubice once again, together with Sergei Kiselev, and at the turn of 1994-95 I won the traditional Rilton Cup in Stockholm (and did so again a year later). An important event was my debut in the Akiba Rubinstein Memorial at Polanica Zdrój in August 1995. I took second place in this prestigious category 14 tournament, beating the winner, the already famous Veselin Topalov, in the last round.

However my first and last Russian Championship final, which took place in Elista in the autumn of 1995, brought me great disappointment. My final round loss against Andrei Sokolov deprived me of both first place and qualification for the Interzonal tournament (which eventually never took place).

In the meantime I visited many interesting countries. For several months I worked as a trainer for the national team of Bangladesh, and participated in the Chess Olympiad in Moscow as a journalist! I did many other interesting things, but could

not overcome the symbolic barrier of a 2600 rating! Several FIDE lists showed ratings of 2595 or 2590 after my name but the enchanted barrier did not come until January 1996.

Rating, rating! Many years have passed since Prof. Arpad Elo, interested in the idea of comparing the level of players from different countries, developed a rating system for purely statistical purposes, one of the many possible and not pretending to perfection. After its official adoption by FIDE, this system turned into a monster which overwhelms chessplayers and determines their destinies: you are a superstar and you are a patzer! And how much fraud and abuse it has caused! Alas, there is no escape, and we will hardly ever stop looking at the achievements of chessplayers through the prism of these dry figures.

In the years 1992-95 I played plenty of interesting games. A lot of them (nos 6, 7, 15, 16, 25-28, 38, 45 and 50) are included in this book.

The natural consequence of moving to Poland was first to obtain a permanent residence card, which I did in 1993, and then, in 1995, to renounce my Russian citizenship and apply for citizenship of the Republic of Poland. Only after receiving citizenship, in accordance with the decision of the Polish Chess Federation (PZSzach), could I participate in the championships of the country and represent Poland in the international arena. This rule is, of course, justified, but a few years earlier, GM Aleksander Wojtkiewicz had been treated much more gently. Anyway, there is no reason to complain.

My decision was accelerated by other circumstances. At the beginning of the 1990s, it seemed that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia would start on the path of democratic change. Several times I appeared in the Polish press in defence of Russia and Russians. Unfortunately, strange things started happening quite soon. In 1994, the Russian government unleashed a war in Chechnya. I was against it and, working in the Press Centre of the Moscow Olympiad at the time, I invited my colleagues to make a statement condemning the war - to no avail.

Thanks to the support of the then president of PZSzach, a well-known journalist, Jacek Żemantowski, the President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski awarded me Polish citizenship in June 1996. However I had made my debut in March (quite unsuccessfully!) in the national championship final (which was won by IM Klaudiusz Urban). Then I played for the Polish national team at the Chess Olympiad in

Yerevan, with a good personal result, 8½ out of 12 on board 1, but the team took a distant place.

In the purely chess sense, 1996 was not particularly successful: excellent results such as victory in the open tournament in Asti in Italy were interspersed with average and even weak performances. The breakthrough was yet to come.

1997 began with victory in the category 11 tournament in Reggio Emilia, another legendary traditional event, which, alas, is not held anymore. Next came the Polish Championship and 1st-3rd places with Robert Kempiński and Jacek Gdanski (Kempiński later won the play-off), after which I went to the traditional open tournament in New York.

This was my first visit to the United States. Of course, I had a lot of impressions about that country, which is quite extraordinary for a European, but I will focus on the tournament. It had a very strong line-up with over thirty grandmasters, including Alexander Morozevich, Vadim Zviagintsev, Loek Van Wely and other celebrities, and extremely difficult conditions (two rounds a day!). Nevertheless, I scored 8 points in 9 games and shared 1st place with Victor Bologan. In the decisive game I defeated Morozevich. I had never had such an excellent result in my previous career!

However that was just the beginning of a great run. In the European Team Championship in Pula I played on board 1 against opponents with an average rating of over 2600. I scored 6½ points in 9 games, winning a small bronze medal for best result on that board, and the Polish team, despite a considerably weakened line-up, took a decent 12th place. Then came victory in a strong open tournament in Vilnius (seventeen grandmasters) with 7 points out of 9 against opponents with an average rating of over 2570. There were inferior results too, e.g. in Koszalin and Polanica Zdrój, but overall I finally felt the wind in my sails! It happens to many athletes - a long ‘normal’ period of arduous, craft work and suddenly a jump forward when everything is successful and possibilities for further progress seem almost limitless; when it's easy to defeat opponents previously considered dangerous, and the world's top ceases to be ‘insurmountable’. An amazing feeling! Unfortunately, a few years later I was to experience exactly the opposite. And then, in 1997, I entered unknown waters.

Two years earlier Kirsan Ilumzhinov, a multimillionaire and dictator of Kalmykia, a small republic in the Russian Federation, became the President of the International

Chess Federation. FIDE was in disarray at that time, and the best chess player in the world, Garry Kasparov, did not recognize its power. He created the so-called Professional Chess Association and organized his own series of World Championships. Meanwhile, FIDE had trouble financing the official World Championship cycle. Ilumzhinov's subsidies were to save it from disaster. And they did! At the same time, the new president proposed a complete change in the system of the World Championship. Instead of the whole cycle consisting of an Interzonal tournament, Candidates matches and the World Championship match, he proposed a single tournament played on the knock-out system. It was supposed to make the games more interesting for spectators and attract sponsors. It did not go well: four times Ilumzhinov had to put up money for the prize fund himself, $5 million in 1997 and $3 million in each of 1999-2001. Still, the knock-out tournaments enabled a large number of strong players to make decent earnings.

The first such tournament took place in December 1997 in the Dutch city of Groningen. Thanks to my relatively high rating, I was included in the line-up. The tournament consisted of short, two-game matches. In case of a tie opponents played more matches, each of two games, at faster time rates and consequent acceleration of the pace (thirty minutes then fifteen minutes per game), and if none of them produced a result, then a deciding 'Armageddon' game. Not a nice mixture of different types of chess, but it allowed the winner to be determined in a short time.

In the first two rounds I won easily with 1½-½ against Paul van der Sterren and Gildardo Garcia. In the first game of the latter match (no. 47) I used a new, previously unknown opening system. In the third round I had a dangerous opponent, Evgeny Bareev, who had been one of the world's top players for some time. However victory in the first game as Black (no. 29) allowed me to defeat him as well.

The next match, against Zurab Azmaiparashvili, was very dramatic. The first game ended in a draw. In the second, I got a winning rook endgame but played inaccurately and let the apparently certain victory slip. The two games of the first rapid match ended in draws too; in the second rapid match, a fatal mistake in a winning position led me to a defeat in the first game, and then a comedy of mistakes in the second encounter ended in my victory. Thus everything had to be determined in the Armageddon. Right at the beginning, the tired Georgian grandmaster committed a schoolboy error and lost a pawn, which I managed to convert without much trouble.

So I found myself in the top eight of the tournament, among the best players in the world (or in the top nine, counting Anatoly Karpov, who was yet to play a match against the winner of the knock-out event)! Although I did not have the strength for the next match and lost smoothly (0-2) to Nigel Short, the success was amazing! Also financially - I received over $60,000 for this result! Never before, nor later in my career, did I earn close to that amount in a single tournament.

In addition to those previously mentioned, games no. 8, 17 and 46, illustrate my play in 1997.

The years 1998-99 turned out to be slightly less successful but I maintained a high 2640-2660 rating. Among my achievements of that period let me mention victory in the Najdorf Memorial in Buenos Aires in 1998, 2nd place behind Morozevich in Pamplona in 1998/99 and victory in the Cutro tournament in 1999. In 1998 I received two invitations to high-level category 17 tournaments, Madrid and Polanica Zdrój, and had decent results. In Polanica, I won a memorable game against Anatoly Karpov (no. 51).

Unfortunately I did terribly at the Elista Chess Olympiad, albeit the Polish team took a decent 15th place, and most importantly, in the next FIDE World Championship, which took place in the summer of 1999 in Las Vegas. Thanks to my high rating (although after some adventures), I started the tournament in the second round. Unfortunately I lost my first game with the white pieces against the famous English grandmaster Anthony Miles, but managed to win the second clash (no. 19) with full concentration and help from my nervous opponent, and then, quite easily, the rapid match. But when I started my second encounter, against Vadim Zviagintsev, similarly with a white loss, the comeback did not take place.

During that time, I had to change my club in Poland. The Stilon club had various problems, including financial, so when I was invited to join the Polonia Warsaw club, I accepted the offer. I won a lot of awards with Polonia including eight more gold medals in the Polish Team Championship, as well as several medals in the European Club Cup. However in 2010 I came back to Stilon.

At the end of 1999, I had another successful performance in the European Team Championships, this time in Batumi, Georgia, My result was similar to that from Pula: 6½ out of 9 with opponents' average rating above 2600. This time I won the second prize on board 1. The Polish national team consisted of young players who formed its core for the next few years: Bartłomiej Macieja, Bartosz Soćko, Robert