



Top-level moves

Listener columnist Murray Chandler, International Master, reports on the world chess championship.

"YOU CANNOT EXPECT me to win the world championship. I'm too old."

These were the words spoken by chess Grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi in a private conversation two years ago; words perhaps more prophetic than even he realised. After making that statement, he nevertheless succeeded in fighting his way through the gruelling qualification series, against top-class opposition, to once more win the right to play for the chess world's supreme honour. The question was — was it too late?

The match between champion Anatoly Karpov, the 30-year-old Russian golden boy, and Viktor Korchnoi, the 50-year-old Soviet defector, began in the small town of Merano in northern Italy on October 1. It was essentially the third match between these two with the world crown at stake. In 1974 in Moscow, Karpov won a closely contested struggle to gain the right to challenge Bobby Fischer in 1975, and consequently became champion by default when the temperamental American refused to play. Shortly afterwards Korchnoi, claiming that his chess ambitions were being stifled by the Soviet authorities, defected while playing a tournament in Holland, and returned to challenge Karpov in an acrimonious clash in Baguio City in the Philippines in 1978.

That match became known as the "Battle of Baguio City" because of the bitter personal and political wrangling throughout its three months and 32 games. Karpov ultimately retained his title by six wins to five, but only after a gigantic struggle which included a heroic comeback by Korchnoi, who trailed at one stage by five wins to two.

In many ways the scene at the beginning of the Merano contest was similar to that at Baguio. When I ar-

rived in the little tourist spa, nestled in the valley of the Italian Tyrol, I had the distinct impression of going back three years into the past. There was Karpov's entourage of 15, somewhat exceeding the official figure of three sponsored by the match organisers. Among them were Grandmaster assistants Mikhail Tal, Lev Polugayevsky, Yuri Balashov and Igor Zaitsev, as well as a cook, an interpreter and a bodyguard. Almost an identical team to that sent to the Philippines, but, as chief of delegation and former Stalinist prosecutor V. D. Baturinsky was no doubt aware, it wouldn't be the same next time if they didn't deliver the goods.

Korchnoi's assistants were even more colourful. They included his constant companion, Petra Leeuwerik, a press officer, a lawyer, a physical trainer, and his guru from the Ananda Marga sect.

His two-man squad of expert helpers, Grandmasters Michael Stean and Yasser Seirawan, was strengthened by the numerous Soviet emigres and defectors who converged on the town to support him. Like a bewildered race of chess refugees, these migrants embraced Merano as a long-lost (albeit somewhat temporary) homeland. They also made a comical sight in the press room during each game, analysing on a board just a couple of metres away from Karpov's delegation. I did not see either faction so much as acknowledge the other's existence, though once, perhaps emboldened by Merano's "miracle grape cure", I did succeed in extracting an autograph from the cigar-chomping Baturinsky ("Cuddles" to his friends) — even if he did sign as far as possible from defector Lev Alburt's name.

If the cold war had its warmer moments off the board, there weren't many in the packed conference centre where the protagonists of the two camps did battle two or three times a

week. The match started catastrophically for Korchnoi. In the first game, despite holding the theoretical advantage of the White pieces, he drifted without a coherent plan as early as the opening. A positive and enormously powerful pawn thrust in the centre by Karpov gained him a winning position and he made no mistake in pressing his advantage home.

Game two was just as bad. While defending an inferior — but tenable — position, Korchnoi made an elementary blunder in the fifth hour of play. It was an ominous sign of middle-aged fatigue, and the Russians were jubilant. "We only have 30-day visas," Karpov gloated, "and we would prefer not to renew them."

In game three, which ended in a draw, the challenger did show a little flash of his old fire. Karpov — as is normal practice in international events — offered a draw directly to Korchnoi, and received the reply: "Citizen Karpov, if you want to offer me a draw, do it through the arbiter." The Russian word "citizen", in the form Korchnoi used it, is normally used only between a prisoner and his jailer. Korchnoi has in the past partly blamed Karpov (if not entirely fairly) for the inability of his wife and son to leave the USSR.

The respite proved to be only fleeting, when Karpov refuted a faulty plan to win the fourth game as well. Before the Merano match began most experts considered Karpov the favourite, winning by perhaps six games to four (the contest was a race to six wins, draws not counting). Suddenly, it seemed, Korchnoi was cracking up — losing three out of the first four games.

It was from this almost hopeless situation that the ebullient Korchnoi struck back to win the sixth game. This feat was all the more astonishing in that he won with Black — for only the second time in some 68 official games with his young rival. It showed the challenger was still capable of brilliant counterattacking games. But his inspiration was too sporadic, and his generally listless and tired play still had his fans worried.

When the champion won game nine there could be little doubt that he was closing in for the kill. And yet the question remained: why was Korchnoi, after so many neck-and-neck struggles with Karpov before, being pasted to a pasta? What turned the Battle of Baguio into the Massacre of Merano?

Viktor Korchnoi has been — and still is — a phenomenon. Twice he broke all precedent in chess history by qualifying ahead of younger rivals to challenge Karpov. After making that tongue-in-cheek remark two years ago about being too old, he continued to apparently defy the laws of nature. But, in my opinion, those laws have finally caught up with him.

His situation was not helped by Karpov's virtually flawless handling of the early part of the match. Despite the honour of having my impartiality questioned by the world champion himself in his book on Baguio (for being Reuters correspondent while helping with the Korchnoi camp analysis), I admire Karpov's play greatly. His sheer accuracy and phenomenal technique have kept him head and shoulders above everyone but Korchnoi since he won his title, and to me he is certainly one of the greatest champions.

Karpov went on to win the match 6-2 after 18 games, thus retaining the title and with it the prestige of the Soviet Union.

In a way it is sad that Korchnoi never quite reached his lifelong goal; he ranks with the legendary figures of Paul Keres and Akiba Rubinstein as one of the greatest players never to win the world championship.

Korchnoi may, however, have the small consolation that this latest effort will be celebrated beyond the usual realm of chess magazines and books. Tim Rice, who wrote the lyrics for *Evita*, was in Merano and has promised a musical about the match. Perhaps the musical score will be kinder to Korchnoi.

A game from the world chess championship is presented, with explanatory notes, overleaf.



Part of Karpov's entourage: former world champion Mikhail Tal (left) and delegation head "Cuddles" Baturinsky.



The scene of the match: Merano in Italy.