

Champion of subtlety

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THE DEATH of Tigran Vartanovich Petrosian, world champion from 1963 to 1969, means an early loss of one of the most subtle grandmasters of all time. Petrosian died in Moscow during August, at the age of 55, following a protracted illness that had kept him away from major competition for the past year. Although, even when champion, the wily Armenian never really fired the imagination of the public in the way that, say, Spassky did, his unique style of play was much respected. With deep strategic manoeuvres that frequently left his opponent baffled, Petrosian developed defensive technique into a fine art until he became almost invincible. His achievements look all the greater considering the personal misfortune that struck his early years. His Armenian parents both died during World War II, and he was forced to seek work as a caretaker to support the remainder of his family.

It was 1953 when the young Tigran qualified for his first world championship Candidates tournament, but it was not until 10 years later that he won the right to challenge Mikhail Botvinnik for his world title. Botvinnik was then 54, and Petrosian's winning margin of five wins, two losses and 15 draws was convincing. In 1966 Tigran successfully defended his crown against the rising star Boris Spassky, but in another challenge three years later he succumbed to the same opponent. Petrosian's last presence in the championship cycle was in 1980, where he reached the final eight before losing his match to Viktor Korchnoi.

In spite of an outstanding career, Petrosian has always had a rather unimpressive public image, often being content with equal first or second in a tournament rather than striving for outright victory. But one can never appreciate the man properly without an intimate examination of his marvellous games. I was fortunate to be present at the 1979 Rio Interzonal where Petrosian took joint first and was the only undefeated player. His round seven game against Harandi particularly brought home to me the insight Petrosian had into certain positions. Harandi did everything "right", castling and developing his pieces. Meanwhile Petrosian fiddled around, his king in the centre, manoeuvring pieces to strange outposts. A deceptive knight advance on move 17 caught Harandi by surprise; seven moves later the Iranian international master resigned.

This devastating exploitation of an advantage is a feature excellently illustrated in this week's game, played at Bled in 1981. After 18 moves Pachman has been positionally outmanoeuvred, but can still hope for a long struggle. White has other ideas and chases the Black king out of hiding with a queen sacrifice. With White being Petrosian, however, even a queen sacrifice is subtle. The final quiet move, cutting off the Black king's retreat, is a tribute in itself to the genius of Tigran Petrosian.

RETI OPENING

T. PETROSIAN	L. PACHMAN
1. Nf3	c5
2. g3	Nc6
3. Bg2	g6
4. 0-0	Bg7



Tigran Petrosian: a genius who was never fully appreciated by the public.

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| 5. d3 | e6 |
| 6. e4 | Nge7 |
| 7. Re1 | 0-0 |
| 8. e5 | d6 |

In his notes afterwards Petrosian recommended 8... b6.

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| 9. e×d6 | Q×d6 |
| 10. Nbd2 | Qc7 |
| 11. Nb3 | Nd4 |

Once again 11... b6 12. Bf4 Qb7 is to be considered.

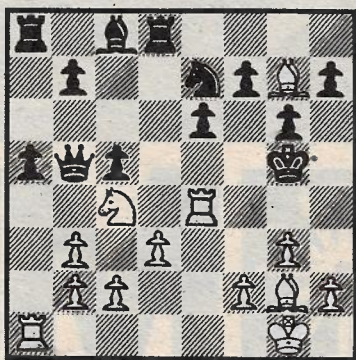
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| 12. Bf4 | Qb6 |
| 13. Ne5! | N×b3 |
| 14. Nc4 | Qb5 |
| 15. a×b3 | a5 |
| 16. Bd6 | Bf6 |
| 17. Qf3 | Kg7 |
| 18. Re4 | |

18. Qxf6 ch!! (as played next move) may even be playable here, but Black has no constructive way of preventing the coming queen sacrifice — even if he sees it coming.

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| 18. ... | Rd8 |
| 19. Q×f6 ch! | |

Giving up queen for bishop to force the Black king from shelter. Such sacrifices are not too unusual, but the difference here is that Petrosian is not mating immediately with checks.

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| 19. ... | K×f6 |
| 20. Be5ch | Kg5 |
| 21. Bg7!! | |



Exquisite. The Black king is prevented from fleeing back to safety via the h6 square, and mate is imminent. Eg 21... Nf5 22. h4 ch N×h4 23. g×h4 ch Kh5 24. Bf3 mate or 23... Kf5 24. Bh3 mate.

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| 21. ... | Resigns |
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