

Genius in the Background

By

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with Nick Aplin



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Preface by Tibor Károlyi

Attila József, who died in 1937, was one of Hungary's greatest ever poets, but while he was alive he received very little appreciation for his art. Andor Nemeth was one of his few close friends; he understood the high level of his art, but never expressed this to the poet. Years later, when József's poems had become part of Hungarian culture and were taught in every Hungarian school, and many streets had been named after him, Nemeth was asked why he had not expressed his appreciation (József was longing for it). He answered, "I am sorry, but when I beat somebody three times out of five at chess, I can't consider him a genius."

Chess society has a similar problem; we only value the winners over the board. Yes, champions have the greatest impact on the game, and they deserve enormous respect for their legacy, but the personalities who did not score so well should also enjoy our respect.

I am fortunate in that I have already had the chance to write about Judit Polgar, Garry Kasparov, and Anatoly Karpov – altogether five books, four of them with Nick Aplin. The chance to analyse and portray the creations of these chess giants naturally made me appreciate their play very much. Although I will always remain proud of these books, there have of course been countless other articles and publications devoted to the achievements of these and other famous chess players. At the same time, I know of several other chess personalities who have accomplished a great deal, yet remain unknown to the great majority of chess fans. Therefore the idea occurred to me to write a book devoted to these unknown talents. By doing so, I hoped to create a book that would be truly unique in its subject matter, and would enable the chess public to become acquainted with a selection of lesser known but still outstanding personalities. I was happy that when I mentioned the idea to my co-author Nick Aplin, he was immediately enthusiastic about it.

Most of the people featured in this book have recorded significant achievements, yet they remain virtually anonymous to the great majority of chess fans. A few of them are known amongst certain segments of the chess world, but none are known as widely as I believe they deserve to be. Some are still alive, while others, I am sorry to say, are no longer with us. Some I know or knew well, and others I have never met. All have made their unique contributions to the world of chess, and all have their own – sometimes very moving – stories.

Instead of simply writing about each individual in a routine way, I took a couple of additional steps that I believe have added significantly to the value of each chapter. Wherever possible, I conducted interviews (some in person, and others by e-mail) with the featured individuals, which have subsequently been reproduced within the text. I hope that after reading them the reader will feel as though he has got to know the person at least a little better than before. Secondly, I asked a number of strong players, some of whom are simply legendary in chess, to write a short appraisal of the individuals included here. I never expected to receive so many contributions from so many great players! I found this response tremendously gratifying, and believe it underlines the value of the book.

Your author, who is first of all a junior trainer who desires to pass on knowledge, believes that getting acquainted with these remarkable chess personalities will deepen anyone's understanding of our game.

I knew from the outset it would be difficult to decide which individuals to feature in the book. There are doubtlessly a great number of worthy candidates – including plenty that remain unknown to this author. I wanted to include people who excelled in different areas of chess. Thus over the course of the book the reader will become acquainted with outstanding chess players, junior trainers, study composers, as well as a few individuals who made significant achievements in more than one of these categories. There were a few candidates who, through no fault of their own, did not make the final cut. For instance, I considered the possibility of devoting chapters to the great Nona Gaprindashvili and the late incomparable Tony Miles, but eventually decided that the inclusion of such well known players would be inconsistent with the overall scheme of the book.

Naturally, the choice was influenced by my personal relationships with some of the featured players. A different author may, quite legitimately, have presented a very different selection of subjects. But thinking in terms of the value that I can offer as an author, it is obvious that I can write a far more fitting tribute to a person whom I know extremely well, as opposed to a total stranger. Of course, there were certain individuals whose accomplishments were so impressive that I felt compelled to include them in the book, despite never having met them in person. In the end, the final choice of player selection was always going to rely on a certain amount of subjective judgement. I am happy with the choices I made, and I hope that the reader will agree.

All that remains is to thank you for reading this book. I hope by the time you reach the end, you will agree that these people are indeed remarkable and enduring chess personalities.

Tibor Károlyi
Soltvadkert, Hungary
October 2009



Topalov's Junior Trainer



Veselin Topalov in the middle, Petko Atanasov on the right

In 2005, Veselin Topalov dominated top-level chess in a way that very few have done before. Not many world champions have had a year like he did. Topalov went from being a strong contender to an undisputed star, and the same happened to his manager for many years, Silvio Danailov. And yet, of all the chess people I have asked, there has not been a single one who knew the name of his junior trainer. Actually, I think hardly anybody knows who Petko Atanasov is and what he has contributed to chess, while everybody has heard of Danailov, and knows the successes he has achieved together with Topalov.

This is not only unfair to Atanasov, but damaging for chess in general. We cannot expect the high level of junior coaching we have seen in the 20th Century to continue, when we do not reward or recognize the effort of the trainers. (It is therefore pleasing to see the very positive words of acknowledgement from both Topalov and Danailov about Atanasov at the end of this chapter.)

It is no laughing matter that Hungary, with a long tradition of great players – Maroczy, Szabo, Portisch, Ribli, the Polgar sisters and most recently Peter Leko, does not currently have a world top twenty player in the under-20 age group in either the boys or the girls section. At the latest World Youth Championships, played in twelve different age groups, Hungary only achieved a single tenth place. And the years before were no better. The lack of dedicated and motivated trainers is creating this crisis.

Obviously the Hungarian situation is worse than most, but my travels have confirmed that the situation is deteriorating in many other countries as well. For example, the Bulgarian juniors are not doing well at these championships either.

Undoubtedly Veselin Topalov is a rare talent with a number of special qualities required to become a great player. (Actually I think he has the most professional attitude of all the world champions. Kasparov sometimes wasted energy on politics, whereas Topalov has been able to focus on chess continuously.) But the career of a champion does not start with his victories, but with his first moves as a junior; in the case of Topalov, in the Bulgarian city Ruse. This was where he met Atanasov.

Atanasov was born in the village of Karan Varbovka, outside Ruse, in 1948. In 1955 his family moved to Ruse to look for a better quality of life. It was at this point that he learned to play chess in school. There were many chess tournaments there and back then chess was a very popular 'sport' (sport for the masses, as it was known under Communism). Thus he encountered our ancient game and took his first lessons.

Who was your own trainer?

"There were no professional trainers at that time. All studies and competitions were amateur. My first trainer was an ambitious amateur chess player – Nikola Chervenovodski. He advised me how and what I must learn from chess theory. He also gave me chess books that were very hard to find during those times."

I checked the database – you were a good junior player. How many times did you represent Bulgaria?

"During the period 1963-66, I was the national junior champion (under 20 years) of Bulgaria 3 times. For some reason, most probably political, I did not take part in world junior events. As a student I participated in three world championships. The first was in Austria in 1968 – the team took the fourth place. I won the board prize on third board with 9½/12 points. (See the game against Marangunic in the games section on page 17.) At my second Student Olympiad in Dresden in 1969 the Bulgarian team finished third. I was the second best on second board with 9½/14. (See the game against Lombard in the games section, page 19.) Finally, I played for the Bulgarian national team at the Under-26 team World Championships in Graz, Austria, in 1972. We took fifth place. On board three I scored 9 points from 14 games."

Who was your trainer when you were a junior?

"Unfortunately in this period there wasn't any particular player around to have a big influence over my maturation as a chess player. My opponents took on this role. First of all I raised my chess level with self-training – learning from the games of popular chess players."

Who are your favourite players – do you have any particular chess icon?

"My favourite player is Mikhail Tal. He is an exceptional fighter and a distinctive chess talent. As a person and a professional, Tal is unique right up to the present day!"

Were you a chess professional?

"From 1976-1991 I was professional chess trainer at the 'Dunav' (Danube) chess club in Ruse."

Do you have a 'best' game? Which was your best tournament?

"I like my Dueball game from Dresden. (*It can be found on page 20 in the games section.*) There was a regular 'Kamen Piskov' Memorial in Ruse. In 1983 I was the winner and maybe this was my best tournament."

What do you think is the best part of your chess?

"My strong point in chess is the middlegame. This is because the books that I read were mostly about chess combinations." (*The games against Iliovski and Peev from the games section show this excellently.*)

How did you develop your endgame play?

"For several years I devoted my time very intensively to the endgame. From my long experience in chess, I have come to the conclusion that young players must learn the endgame in detail in order to absorb fundamental knowledge about chess." (*The games against Lalic and Gazis in the games section show the benefits of this approach.*)

When did you start working with Topalov?

"I started to work with Veselin in 1986. I did not know him personally until his mother came to me and entrusted me to take him into my group. At that time I was teaching a group of advanced children between 12-14 years old. He was about ten years old.

For a ten-year-old boy he had the necessary basic chess knowledge. But he did not know the higher chess rules: observing the basic principles and laws, building a strong strategy in a given game. In the beginning Veselin wasn't so different from the rest of the children in the group. But after two years of work with him, he had changed a lot.

In order to become a very good chess player you need to acquire two things: chess knowledge and chess thought. The second characteristic is very important and it's hard to perfect someone's level of expertise in this area. The chess thought factor demands many hours at the chessboard, many hours analysing specific positions.

I then realized that this boy had enormous potential and that his future was in professional chess. With much effort I persuaded his mother to agree to send him to a sport school rather than to a school for foreign languages. This gave him a much better chance to develop himself as chess player."

In what ways did you work with him? How many sessions did you have with him per week, and how long did the sessions last?

"Veselin undertook exercises lasting 2 hours three times a week in the beginning. Gradually his training time was increased. When he started to learn in sport school, I trained him individually. We had exercises every day and weekly we had to have about 30-36 hours."

Any memorable game he played when you were coaching him?

"Vesko participated for the first time in an international tournament 'Albena' when he was 11 years old. He produced a very good result."

Here is one of his victories in the tournament:

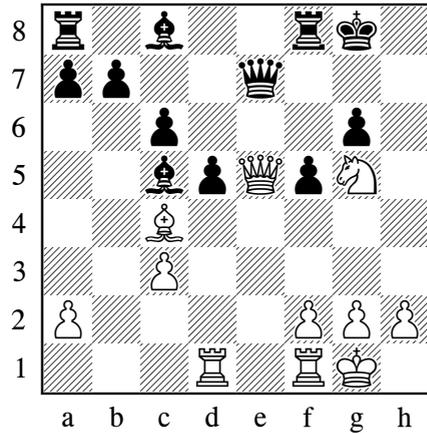
Veselin Topalov – Dimitar Marholev

Albena 1986

1.e4 e5 2.♟f3 ♞c6 3.♞b5 ♞c5 4.0-0 ♟f6
5.c3 ♟xe4 6.d4 exd4 7.cxd4 ♞b6 8.d5 ♟e7
9.♞e2 f5 10.♟c3 ♟xc3 11.bxc3 0-0 12.♞g5
♞c5 13.♞ad1 h6 14.d6! hxg5 15.♟xg5 g6
16.♞e5 c6 17.dxe7 ♞xe7 18.♞c4† d5

(diagram)

19.♞xd5! ♞xe5 20.♞xe5† ♟g7 21.♞xc5 1-0



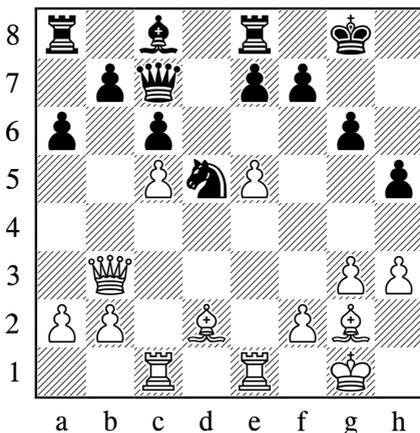
What openings did you teach him?

“In the beginning his opening repertoire was very modest. With White we trained with 1.d4 and had various schemes to meet Black’s defences. With Black against 1.d4 we practised the Old Indian Defence. We practised the French Defence against 1.e4, but later he refused to play it and started to play the Sicilian Defence instead. When his rating increased Vesko started to play 1.e4 and 1.♟f3 and many more openings.”

Did you notice you often sacrifice the exchange? He is known for that as well. Did you work on it together?

“The sacrifice of material (a pawn or even a piece) is a basic part of any chess combination. Of course I have in my practice many such examples. From the beginning Veselin coordinated the interaction between queen and minor pieces perfectly. A sacrifice of the exchange was his basic tactical approach.”

As you will see in the games section, Atanasov is fond of sacrificing the exchange, something that has become a trademark tool of Topalov’s. The following example is remarkable:



Veselin Topalov – Gata Kamsky

Sofia 2006

(diagram)

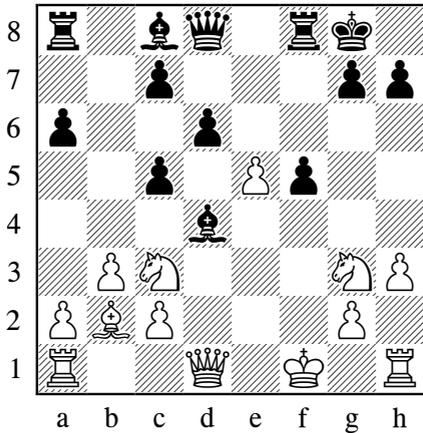
26.e6! ♞xe6 27.♞xe6!! fx6 28.♞e1 ♞d7
29.♞d3 ♟h7 30.♞e5 ♟f6 31.♞e3 ♟g7
32.♞e4 ♟f7 33.♞c2 ♞ad8 34.♞h6 ♞g8
35.♞a5 ♞d4 36.♞c3 ♞c4 37.♞b3 ♞d3
38.♞xe6† ♟e8 39.♟g2 ♞f8 40.♞g7 ♞d5
41.♞f5 ♞f7 42.♞xe7† 1-0

defending the g3-knight. 19. ♖hf1 f5! Black wins back the piece with a huge initiative.

15...f5!

Opening the position.

16.e5!?



16...♗b7!

White's last move kept the f-file closed but it also opened this diagonal.

17. ♖d3 ♗e4

17... ♗g5! Bringing the queen up at once would also inflict pain.

18. ♖d2?

Controlling the h5-square with 18. ♖e2 was a bit better, although it is doubtful that it would be enough to save the game. 18... ♗g5 (Or 18... ♗h4! 19. ♗h5 dxe5 – Black gets tremendous play here as well.) 19. ♗h5 ♗xe5 White is in huge trouble.

18... ♗h4!

After this White is simply lost.

19. ♖e1 ♖f4† 20. ♗e2 ♗xg2 21. ♖f1 ♗xf1† 22. ♗xf1 ♖ae8

0–1

The end of the game was just a rout.

Here is a game where Atanasov attacks successfully from an innocent-looking position, in a manner reminiscent of Tal.

Petko Atanasov – Juergen Dueball

Dresden 1969

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.g3

This is a rare combination of variations.

5...♗g7 6.♗g2 ♗e6

Masters more often take on c3: 6... ♗xc3 7.bxc3 c5, with typical play against the enemy centre.

7.♗f3 0–0 8.0–0 c5

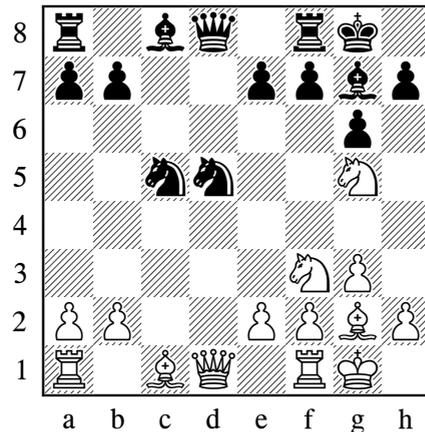
8... ♗c6!? is possible.

9.♗e4 ♗a6 10.♗eg5 ♗c8

It was worth considering 10... ♗b6!? 11. ♗xe6 fxe6 with a very active position.

11.dxc5 ♗xc5?

After 11...e6! Black should have a playable position.



12. ♗xh7!

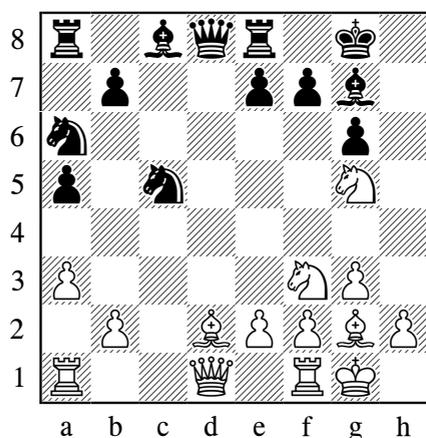
This surprising tactical shot wins a pawn.

12... ♗e8 13. ♗hg5 ♗b4?

Looking for counterplay on the queenside, but he leaves the kingside vulnerable. Instead Black should just develop with 13...e6. His pieces stand quite well, so it would still take a lot of effort for White to convert his extra pawn. When something goes wrong in a game one often does better to act like a hedgehog and let the opponent try to win the position.

14.♔d2 a5 15.a3 ♖ba6

The knight is out of the game here.



16.♞c2!

If 16.♞c1!? ♕xb2? 17.♞xc5 ♖xc5 18.♞c2 ♕xa3 19.♞a2 wins, but 16...♕f5! keeps Black in the game.

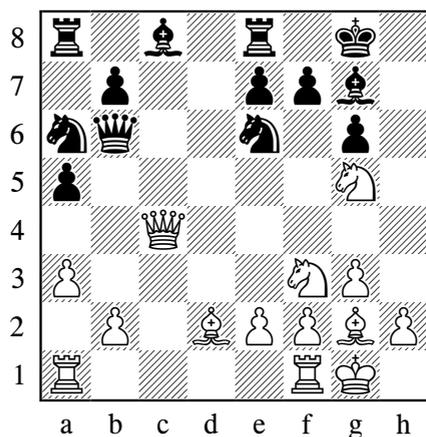
16...♞b6?

The lesser evil was 16...♕e6! 17.♖xe6 ♖xe6 18.♞ac1 when White still wins, but it would take some work.

17.♞c4!!

Many people would just try to win with the extra pawn, but Atanasov makes the effort to find the best move and goes straight for the kill.

17...♖e6



18.♞h4!

Quite a remarkable queen manoeuvre. In two moves, from a quiet Catalan-esque positional game, Atanasov turns it into a strong attack against the opponent's king.

18...♞xb2 19.♞ac1

Even more clinical was 19.♞h7† ♖f8 20.♞ab1!, e.g. 20...♞f6 21.♖e4 ♞f5 22.♕h6 f6 23.♖d4 and it is all over.

19...♞xa3?

After 19...♖xg5 20.♕xg5 ♞xa3 21.♕f4! White has a strong attack with ♖g5 the next move.

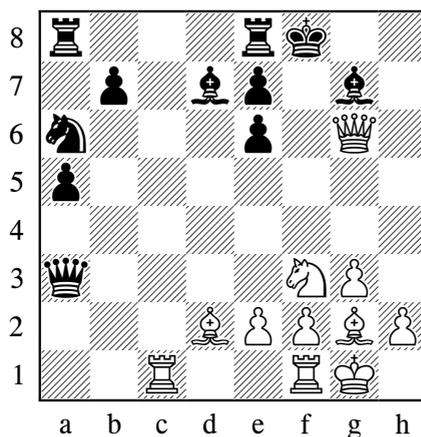
20.♞h7†!

Now Atanasov checkmates his German opponent.

20...♖f8 21.♖xe6† fxe6

After 21...♕xe6 22.♕h6 wins immediately.

22.♞xg6 ♕d7



23.♖g5 ♖g8 24.♞c4!

1-0

It was a very well conducted attack.

Here is a nice attacking game played by Atanasov some time later. This was his first game to be published in *Chess Informant*, although it was not annotated by either of the contestants. Grandmaster Bukic analysed it, meaning that the quality of the game was recognized by an independent expert.