

Korchnoi's main move

By: Peter Hoomans and Eddy Sibbing

In the summer of 1976, Viktor Korchnoi made an asylum application in the Netherlands. In this article we look back on this important move in his life, and its consequences.

Asylum application

One day after the award ceremony of the sixteenth IBM tournament, which he won with Tony Miles, Viktor gives a simultaneous play at the Russian Embassy in The Hague. Afterwards, he will go to Amsterdam by taxi. The following morning he reports at the Foreign Police: Viktor Lvovich Korchnoi, born March 23, 1931 in Leningrad, residence Leningrad, married, a child, occupation: Chess Grandmaster, is registered as a refugee from the Soviet Union. After that he disappears for two weeks in the anonymity of a townhouse of his friend Walter Mooij in Westzaan. During the day, when Walter goes to school in Zaandam to give music lessons, the grandmaster remains alone in Mooij's home.



Viktor Kortchnoi and Walter Mooij in Westzaan 1976.

The two got to know each other at the Hoogovens tournament in 1968, where Mooij went to watch every day. Later that year, on a day of rest during the Candidates match against Samuel Reshevsky in the Olympic Stadium of Amsterdam, the two run by chance at the Damrak. They decide to drink coffee, in the presence of Furman, at that time the coach of Korchnoi. Since then Viktor sends a card or letter, often with a party he was proud of, by the grandmaster himself printed on postal paper. Mooij has already been informed about his reasons for the West for a

long time, has already told him: "If you decide to come to the Netherlands, you can come to me." Now it was time to make his promise come true.

Korchnoi's asylum application is world news. He is following in a stream of leading scientists, writers, musicians and athletes who leave the Soviet Communist regime and flee to the free West. As he subdues, the Swiss Biel is running an interzonal tournament, including Tal, Petrosjan and Smyslov - they refrain from commenting just like Sosonko, who is also a participant. Bobby Fischer sends Korchnoi a telegram to congratulate him on this courageous decision.

History

The decision to apply for asylum in the West has been a long haunt at Korchnoi's head. Reason was the anti-Russian counterfeiting of the Russian chess federation, which eventually prevented Korchnoi from exercising his profession as a grandmaster in freedom. After losing the match of 12½-11½ in the final cycle of Anatoli Karpov in 1974, he spoke to a Yugoslav journalist openly about some abuses, including helping Karpov by the Russian chess federation and countering his own ambitions on the world title. The direct result was that Korchnoi was excluded from participating in foreign tournaments for one year. In December 1975, he is for the first time returning abroad and takes part in the traditional Christmas tournament in the British Hastings. Korchnoi has already started filming his personal archive (letters, photo albums) with friends in the West, like his former second Sosonko, and has already opened a Dutch bank account. Sosonko recalls in his book *The reliable past* the following about a possible flee: "It was anything but an impulsive decision. In January [1976], at the tournament in Hastings, Kortchnoi and I had spent nearly every evening weighing every possible means for him to defect to the West."

IBM-tournament

That it happened immediately after the award ceremony of the IBM tournament was a practical decision. Still during the award ceremony on Sunday he would have asked Tony Miles, co-winner with 9½ out of 15, what was the right spelling of 'political asylum'. It is likely that more insiders were aware of Korchnoi's intention to stay in the Netherlands, but it is difficult to find out who knew exactly. How active was, for example, the role of Max Euwe, who was the chairman of the FIDE at the time? Donner tells in his book about Euwe: "At the opening of the tournament in Amsterdam he (Korchnoi) called for my help in a conversation with Euwe. This conversation came down to the following: Korchnoi had many problems in the Soviet Union, his position was difficult, soon the candidate matches for the world championship he wanted to do, and what would happen if he ...

Euwe had a half word enough: "Of course, you hold the same rights, Viktor," he said, and "of course we will help you, do not worry," and so on. I interpreted without showing my emotions, because I understood the importance of what happened here. I can not say that their conversation has been decisive for his decision - Korchnoi has lived there for a long time - but it's no doubt that Euwe's merciless tone, Korchnoi, has strengthened in his intention".



Tony Miles and Viktor Korchnoi at the prize-giving of the IBM-tournament in 1976.

Euwe, therefore, in his capacity as FIDE president, more or less guarantor as Korchnoi protector as refugee. But to what extent were Euwe and FIDE secretary Ineke Bakker aware of the time of his flee? That is not a direct answer. In the IBM Tournament Book, written by Constant Orbaan, we read in the second-round report: "Soon after the official closing time, the great masters continued to fight each other's ideas and variations in critical positions (...) Then pause for a moment, because FIDE president Euwe was on the phone for Korchnoi (...) On returning Korchnoi stared helplessly and bewildered in the air. Certainly, he had just talked with 'the Doctor', but what was the conversation actually about and what exactly was the appointment? "There is a second call, but I doubt strongly whether there was still some memory in his head of scholarship except for the variants of Velimirovic", said Orbaan.

Certainly, Korchnoi was an evening guest at Karel van het Reve at the Amstel during the tournament. Van het Reve was an old known of Euwe. During the war he had given him a Russian lesson and during the World Cup in Moscow (spring 1948) he had been Euwe's interpreter for six weeks. At the Amstel, Korchnoi met, among other things, the writer Andrej Amalrik, who had previously received an expedition visa to the Netherlands. Van het Reve, Professor of Slavish and writer, together with historian Jan Willem Bezemer and American politician Peter Reddaway, founded the *Alexander Herzen Foundation*. The purpose was to give (let) dissident Soviet literature in the West. Perhaps the house of Van het Reve at the Amstel has also been one of the subduction addresses for the grandmaster of Leningrad in the weeks following his asylum application. Daughter Jozien van het Reve, in any event, remembers the image of Korchnoi, standing by the window and holding the curtain on a stick to peel out.

Korchnoi himself was terribly nervous in those weeks immediately after the asylum application, Mooij remembers, and he did not trust everyone in advance. Hans Ree wrote *'In my chess'*: “When he applied for political asylum in Amsterdam in 1976, he was afraid of retaliation actions by the KGB and he was in a Dutch village. Ineke Bakker, who served as Euwe's secretary general at FIDE, chess organizers Berry Withuis and Donner, visited him. Because he knew that people were left, Korchnoi shook enormously and he left the village right away. In his book, he still seems convinced that he escaped with a great danger. I am sure those people would only help him.”



Hans Ree against Viktor Korchnoi, IBM-tournament 1976.

A week later, the news follows that Korchnoi gets a residence permit for half a year. Given its status of international fame, this decision follows faster than usual. Whether he is eligible for the status of political refugee is being investigated further. In the second week of August, the world top will be public again for the first time. He has signed up as a member of the Royal Dutch Chess Union and is playing for Volmac Rotterdam. According to *Schakend Nederland*, moneylender Joop van Oosterom is “the highest bidder in a number of interested clubs”. Korchnoi will also regularly visit Van Oosterom to coach the former Dutch youth champion in his activities as correspondence chess. The arrival of Korchnoi at Volmac is a successful period for the Rotterdam association. In the twenty years that follow, the club becomes as many as 17 times champion of the Netherlands, with the WC candidate for years as a pillar. Volmac was also known among the strongest teams from Eastern Europe internationally in those years in the Europe Cup. The highlight was the achievement of the final in 1979 against Boerevestnik from Moscow. Due to the participation of Korchnoi, it was impossible to hold the match in Moscow, but the German Chess League chairman Alfred Kinzel invited the teams to play the match in Germany. The final in Bad Lauterberg was lost by Volmac with 10-8, without Euwe who got sick.

Furthermore, Viktor drives the country to provide simultaneous, which are crowded. For the same reason he goes to Switzerland. There, also, Austrian-based Petra Leeuwerik, who lived for ten years in a Siberian work camp, has lived in Russia, thus speaking Russian. In the meantime she draws the attention of the grandmaster by placing a copy of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* next to the game board. Not long afterwards, she becomes Viktor's life companion and later his second wife.



Karpov, Euwe, Marcos, Korchnoi and Leeuwerik at the opening of the WC 1978.

Russians reaction

One month after his asylum application, an official response from the Soviet-Russian side finally follows. Until then, the authorities have been completely silenced, but a Soviet chess federal communiqué printed in Russian magazine *64* does not lie. Korchnoi is often guilty of 'landslide', 'sickness of sincerity', 'defamatory allegations' and 'unauthorized psychological influence'. All his titles are taken away and it is announced that the FIDE has filed a request to exclude Korchnoi from participating in the Candidate Matches. Extremely painful is the letter of almost all Russian grandmasters, including the old world champions Smyslov, Tal and Petrosjan, who, in words of equal importance, distantly distribute Korchnoi's flee to the Netherlands. Anatoli Karpov writes a separate open letter. He is also opposed to Korchnoi's act, but the world champion chooses less trendy words. From this moment on, the Soviets follow the line that no other Soviet chess-player may participate in tournaments for which Korchnoi is invited. A form of blackmail, and as Korchnoi does not appear to have received an invitation to the 1977 Highlanders tournament, he thinks the leadership of the tournament is to be in awe for the Soviet pressure. It ends with a sissier because Korchnoi will play a two-match against Petrosjan in February and a heavy tournament like Hoogovens would not be the right preparation.



Viktor Korchnoi, running during a stage with the Dutch National Chessteam at Papendal

In the following months, Korchnoi finds some distraction in the Netherlands. He is appointed as a trainer of the Dutch Olympiade team. Thanks to a generous grant from the Dutch Sports Federation (NSF), there is a budget for a training camp at the hotel Nieland in Apeldoorn. Korchnoi impresses during chess technical sessions through his way of analyzing. He is not pleased with a vague statement and goes deeper into openings than until then the habit is with the top-ranking toppers. Also, for the first time, attention is paid to physical training. Apart from Donner everyone (Timman, Ree, Böhm, Sosonko, Ligterink and coach Bouwmeester) is heading for jogging. The team also includes a masseuse. The Netherlands ends second at the Olympiad in Haifa, where the Soviet and other Eastblock states are missing, half a point behind the United States.

In order to get Korchnoi to play, half-November at Waling Dijkstra's initiative is a double event with Jan Timman. In the Frisian Beetsterzwaag the conclusion is not to be read that he has not had a serious opposition for a long time: $5\frac{1}{2}-2\frac{1}{2}$. During this match, he writes his autobiography, especially at night, in which he accomplishes the nuances of past and present. Ree, present as a second of Timman, writes in *My Chess*: "... Sometimes we heard him laughing at his hotel like a wolf at night."

At the end of December, he will leave Switzerland by train. "I prefer to stay in the Netherlands" he lets know the traveling telegraph reporter Rob Hoogland. In the struggle for the right to challenge world champion Karpov, the Soviets stopped their initial opposition to Korchnoi's participation in the World Cup. In the quarterfinals he will take place in twelve matches from the end of February until the beginning of April against Tigran Petrosjan, hated by him. Ree is one of two seconds in Italian Il Ciocco, it will eventually be 6½-5½ in favor of Korchnoi. Jaap van den Herik notes as reporter of *De Telegraaf* that Korchnoi runs fifty circles every day at the local athletics track. And that he takes a plate of porridge for breakfast, because Viktor tells, "That's good for the circulation." His attention to nutrition is one of the aspects that characterizes his approach. To his teammates at Volmac, he shared roasted chocolate, vitamin bruised tablets and ginseng, convinced that they would be beneficial to the performance behind the board.

Family

The flee to the West even seemed to be secret to his wife Bella and his 17-year-old son Igor, though Hans Ree suspects: "Viktor had discussed with Bella, but to protect her from the Soviet authorities he kept the outside world full of that they knew nothing." Soon after Viktor's flight, Bella and Igor are intimidated by the KGB. Friends no longer come, Bella loses her job, they are being chased and agents follow them on the streets. Igor submerges when he is called for military service. He is afraid he will not get a visa when he fulfills his duty because he could then be aware of state secrets. After being hid in Tallinn, Riga and Moscow, Igor is arrested and sentenced to 2,5 years of labor camp in Siberia. Bella has been fortunate to have a nice legacy, enabling them to survive. Regularly she has contact with Viktor, usually by telephone, because mail often does not come in.

Korchnoi has fought since 1976 to get his wife and son to the West. In support of his struggle, the grandmaster wrote letters to various presidents (including Brezjnef, Carter, Tito, Marcos), Pope John Paul II, Senator Edward Kennedy, FIDE, National Chess Unions, and Chess Tournament Organizers. Over the years, numerous, especially Western grandmasters have supported Korchnoi's struggle. At the Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1978 many participants signed a statement of support. In 1980, a support committee was established to bring about the family reunification of Korchnoi. Regular news, especially in the Netherlands, is newspaper articles about this case, if there was anything new to report. Despite all this publicity and allegations, the Soviet Union does not shrink, especially because Korchnoi is often (very) aggressive. His distrust and suspicion towards various people, and especially the FIDE, have grown tremendously.

On May 16, 1982, Igor released his work camp after 2.5 years. Within two months, he and Bella get an expedition visa to Israel. On July 4, 1982 they arrive in Vienna and fly to Zurich. The reunification with Viktor has to wait one more moment, because the flight date has changed, he still has chess obligations in the French Colmar.

The sudden breakthrough of the Russians is mainly a result of the silent diplomacy that Fridrik Olafsson has conducted. As a FIDE president, he decides to postpone the World Cup match between Karpov and Korchnoi in Merano (1981) (Olafsson: "It was in my capacity as President of FIDE that I postponed the match, according to the regulations the FIDE President was personally and officially responsible for the entire match") because he did not regard a sporting event as long as one's wife and child were detained in the country of the other. The Russians reacted fiercely to Olafsson's decision, but this keeps track of things. Then a delegation from

the Russian chess federation, including the infamous Baturinski, visits the FIDE office in Amsterdam. After the interview with Olafsson, the match continues. What has just been agreed has remained unknown, but has certainly caused the release of Igor and Bella. At Donner's question, "if he [Olafsson] was in a position that he could accuse the Russians at any time in the near future, he answered, yes." (*Volkskrant*, July 7, 1982)

The 'family reunification' with Viktor was all but a success because Viktor was already living with Petra Leeuwerik. Son Igor did not want to be in contact with his father and soon a divorce procedure was started soon after arriving in the West. The divorce was pronounced in 1986 and the judge sentenced Viktor to financially support Bella and Igor. Only after Bella's death in 1995, the father / son relationship recovered.



The 'old rivals' playing each other in the VSB-tournament of 1987 in Amsterdam.

The 'Korchnoi Boycott' ends in June 1984 when the Russians allow Viktor to participate in the match between the USSR and the rest of the world in London. Under the rule of Gorbachev, Korchnoi is again offered the citizenship of the Soviet Union in 1989, even though he had no need to visit the USSR at that time.

In the Belgian Reformatory Newspaper of May 27, 1981, Korchnoi stated that he would think twice if he had to choose again: "I have so much misery about my family that, in such a case, my decision would not be fixed stand", said 50-year-old Korchnoi at a press conference in the Belgian capital. Korchnoi took his decision to request political asylum in the West in the belief that the Russian authorities would allow his wife Bella and son Igor "after a year or two" to leave the country to join him.

Sources: Walter Mooij, Genna Sosonko, Hans Ree, Fridrik Olafsson, Hans Böhm, Herman van Bekkum and countless books and papers. This Article was published In 'Nieuwsbrief 90' (Decembre 2016) of the Max Euwe Centre.