

**Nikolai Rezvov, from Child Burglar
to Grandmaster:
A World Champion's Favorite Composers**

Sergei Tkachenko

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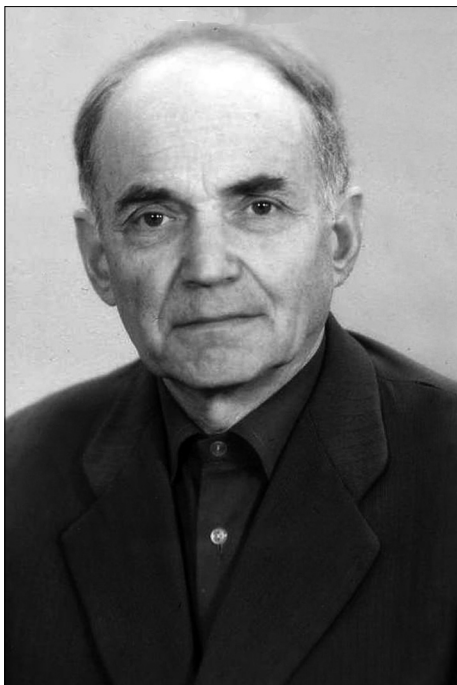
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Nikolai Vasilevich Reznov (1921-2013)

INTRODUCTION

The community of chess composers is rich in personalities. Nikolai Vasilevich Rezvov, Ukrainian chess composition grandmaster and FIDE chess composition international master, led a most remarkable life!

He was born in Odessa on 21 September 1921. These were challenging times, with the city suffering from the aftermath of the horrors of the Russian civil war¹.

Soviet power was established in Odessa on 7 February 1920, but life was far from peaceful or stable. Crime was rampant. The transport system was paralyzed. Businesses worked sporadically and the Odessa water supplies were only turned on for special “water days”. The city witnessed a financial collapse. Consider the following figures: the average salary at the port in December 1920 was 2,200–2,500 rubles, yet by December 1922 it had risen to 100 million rubles. Naturally, prices had shot up, driving the rocketing salaries. For

¹ I write in detail about Odessa during the Russian civil war and chess life during that period in my book *Alekhine's Odessa Secrets: Chess, War and Revolution* (Limited Liability Company Elk and Ruby Publishing House, 2018)

example, the newspaper *Odessa Izvestiia* cost 1,000 rubles in September 1921 and had increased in price to 75,000 rubles 12 months later. Food prices rose at cosmic rates. And all this in the midst of a cholera epidemic...

At the end of 1921 *Odessa Izvestiia* warned: “Hunger is at Odessa’s door. Until now we have been talking about an impending catastrophe. Now it is here, facing us. All the signs for this are visible. Cases of scurvy and even death from starvation are becoming frequent.”

Nikolai’s family suffered more bad news in addition to this social disaster: his father deserted them soon after Nikolai’s birth and his parents divorced. Our hero found himself the sole male in his family. It’s hard to imagine how his mother and grandmother survived such abysmal times with a newborn.

Life in Odessa improved in 1923, when the Soviet government began to transport cargo via the city’s port. This salutary trade, together with the New Economic Policy (“NEP”) and a currency reform, rapidly revived the city’s factories.

Nikolai Vasilevich told the author of this book that he was feeding his family by the age of four!

A garrison was located next to the port, protecting the port’s warehouses and equipment. Odessa lads would often run down to the port to watch the cargo ships. The soldiers acted kindly

towards these ubiquitous urchins and even fed them porridge. Nikolai would bring some of this precious sustenance home for his mother and grandmother.

Well, it wasn't only for trips to the port that these Odessite waifs were famous. Their lack of height and innate savviness enabled them to slip through small windows of rich apartments and open the doors for older hands. This was a particular game of "noble thieves" for which Odessa, let's face it, had long been famous! It's not hard to guess what the "endgame" of this romantic way of life would have been for young Nikolai had it not been for one fateful encounter at the age of five or six!

After creeping his way into an apartment belonging to a local jeweler following a tip-off, Nikolai found himself caught in a trap. The owner, who had sensed trouble ahead, had stayed at home and caught the young cat-burglar. The logical reaction would have been to grab this *Oliver Twist* by the scruff of his neck and haul him off to the police. However, the jeweler acted differently. He offered this failed burglar's mother a deal to take him on as an apprentice and teach him the subtleties of the jewelry trade. A risky and unusual step, frankly! Moreover, in order to dispel any thoughts the urchin may have had about returning to his thieving past, the jeweler, a passionate chess lover, taught his young charge the rules of the game. And that is how

the child burglar Nikolai Rezvov crawled through the window into the world of chess!

I asked him about this fascinating event in detail. “The jeweler was more scared than the little urchin!” Rezvov conceded. “Once I had squeezed through the window and landed in his apartment he hit me hard on the right hand with a club and smashed my thumb! Blood oozed onto the windowsill. So I turned out to be the injured party!”

As well as playing chess the jeweler was a big fan of puzzles and studies. He would carefully draw compositions for his pupil in a notebook. The jeweler was particularly enamored by the works of the brilliant American Samuel Loyd and he infected Nikolai with a love of solving these tough little challenges. Actually, contact was even closer than that – Rezvov’s mother and the jeweler formed a relationship and she moved in with him! Moreover, Nikolai was schooled at home by the jeweler in addition to his apprenticeship.

At the age of fourteen Rezvov became a full-time employee of the jewelry factory. Chess was a favorite game there and the professional jewelers loved to play chess during lunch breaks and after work. The factory had its own team which played in the city’s team championships. At the factory, Nikolai befriended the nephew of the first grandmaster of the Soviet Union, Boris Verlinsky. Actually, the

nephew didn't much like his famous uncle, who would come to stay in Odessa from his home in Moscow for a vacation almost every summer. The chess master would stay with close relatives, which made his nephew feel uncomfortable.

My friend, though, had no recollection of the first champion of Ukraine, Yakov Vilner. "Vilner left Odessa at the end of the 1920s, and I was still discovering chess," Rezvov explained. However, he did remember Capablanca visiting Odessa in summer 1936 and his series of simultaneous exhibitions. Many local players wanted to challenge the Cuban but the number of boards was restricted to thirty each time. Rezvov had recently reached the level of second category (approximately 1600-1800 Elo) and hoped to be one of the lucky few to play Capa, but it wasn't to be.

Among the chess events of pre-WWII Odessa he remembered the opening of the chess and checkers pavilion in the Taras Shevchenko park. This is where simul, competitions and ordinary tournaments were held. The chess idol of pre-war Odessa was the sole master in the city – Samuel Zhukhovitsky (who died in 2016, just one month short of a hundred years old, and whose biography I recently published in Russian together with Grandmaster Dmitry Kryavkin). Rezvov managed to draw against Zhukhovitsky in a simul.

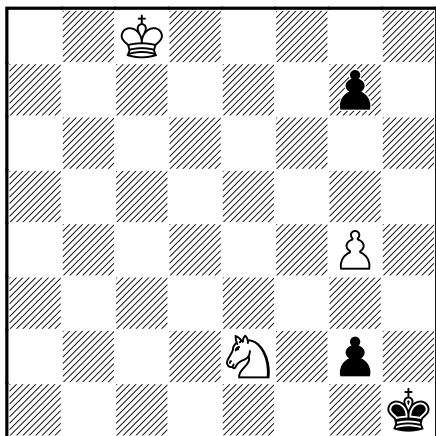
My friend loved to recount life in pre-war Odessa. He remembered in detail the destruction of the Transfiguration Cathedral: “The explosion was so powerful that our house on Degtyarnaya St. shook despite being four blocks away from the cathedral. Glass was blown from the windows of several houses on Lev Tolstoi St., which led to the cathedral.” This sad event happened in May 1936, before Capablanca’s visit.

Rezvov made his first attempt to compose a chess study just before war broke out. He sent the study to the magazine *Chess in the USSR*, where it got lost. Shortly after, on 22 June 1941, the Germans invaded, thus starting what the Soviets termed the Great Patriotic War.

Mobilization began in Odessa on the very first day of war. Martial law was declared by the Soviet government in the city three days later. Men born in 1905–1918 were called up in the first draft.

His permanently maimed right thumb as well as his status as his family’s sole breadwinner with elderly dependents allowed Rezvov an exemption, all the more so as he was born later than the group being called up. But why on earth would he want to claim privileges when the enemy was heading straight for his beloved Odessa? Rezvov convinced the military recruitment office to send him to the front as a volunteer. The lad was assigned to

No. 1
Competition of the Ukrainian Sports
Committee, 1957
3rd–4th prize



White to move and win

1. ♔d7 ♔h2! There is nothing to be gained from
1...g1=♚ 2. ♞xg1 ♔xg1 3. ♔e6 ♔g2 4. ♔f7 ♔g3
5.g5 and the end.

2. ♔e6 ♔h3 3. ♔f5 ♔h4 4.g5!! The only way!
But not 4. ♔f4? g6!! (white is in zugzwang!) 5. ♞g1
g5+ 6. ♔f5 (definitely not 6. ♔f3 and stalemate) 6...
♔g3 7. ♔xg5 ♔f2 8. ♞h3+ ♔g3 9. ♞f4 g1=♞! and
a draw.

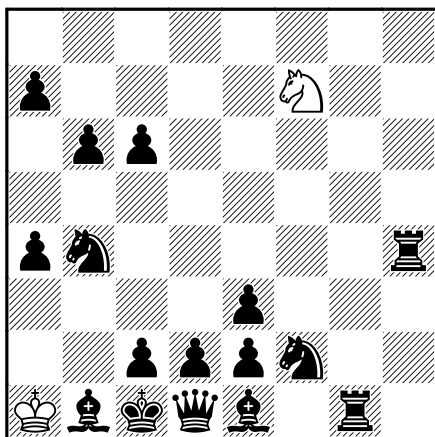
4...g6+! (4...♔h5 5. ♞f4+) 5. ♔xg6 ♔g4. Black
is again ready to save himself by chasing the knight,
but...

6. ♞g1! ♔g3 7. ♔f5! ♔f2 8. ♞h3+ ♔g3 9. ♞f4!
g1=♚ (9...g1=♞ 10.g6!) 10. ♞e2+. White wins.

Rezvov's very first endgame study!

The contest's judge, international master
Tigran Gorgiev, said: "This is a simple but very well
constructed composition."

No. 2
1st team championship of Ukraine, 1965
(edited by S. Tkachenko, 2017)
1st place



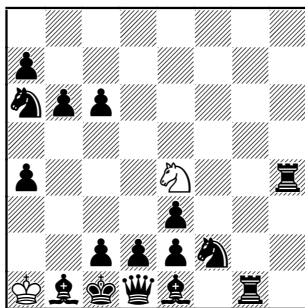
White to move and draw

This is a fantasy position: just a knight against an entire black army! White's plan is simple: to transfer his knight to the squares a2, b3, d3 or e2 with stalemate. The obvious move here seems to be 1.♞e5? However, after 1...♔a2! 2.♞d3+ ♞bxd3! there is no stalemate.

White saves the day with the roundabout maneuver 1.♞g5!! This postpones white's knight's rendezvous with the promised land for another three moves! It turns out that black cannot take advantage of the extra time given to him. Black has two main responses:

A) 1...♞a6! Nor can black win after 1...♖d4 2.♞e4 ♖d3 3.♞c3! a3 4.♞xe2+ ♔xe2, and stalemate is achieved.

2.♞e4! Preventing 2...♞c5! 3.~ ♞b3#.



2...♔a2! 3.♘c3! Avoiding the trap after 3.♘c5? ♘xc5!, and there is no stalemate option left.

3...♔c4! (3...♔e6 4.♘xe2+) 4.♘e4! Again distancing himself from the sacrificial square, but threatening 5.♘c5! and then dying on b3 or d3.

4...♔b5! 5.♘c3! But not 5.♘c5? ♖b4! 6.♘b3+ ♖xb3!, and the white king has gained his unwanted freedom.

5...♔c4 6.♘e4! ♖g5. Otherwise it's a draw.

7.♘c5! (7.♘xf2? ♖b5!) 7...♔b5 8.♘b3+! axb3. Stalemate.

B) 1...♘e4! Seeing as he didn't manage to grant the white king his freedom, why not free his commanding officer instead?

2.♘e6! Avoiding the temptation of 2.♘xe4? ♔g3! 3.♘c3 ♕f1! 4.♘a2+ ♔d1 5.♘c3+ ♔e1!, and the black king has evaded persecution.

