

**Mikhail Zinar's Difficult Pawn Endings:
A World Champion's Favorite Composers**

Sergei Tkachenko

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Mikhail Zinar, 1971

INTRODUCTION

According to his passport, Mikhail Afanasievich Zinar was born on 9 May 1951. However, as Zinar admitted to the author of this book, the document has taken a liberal interpretation of time. In reality, our hero was born half a year earlier – on 22 November 1950. Why does the data in his passport not accurately reflect the date that the future king of pawn studies appeared on our planet? The reason is to be found in the geopolitical tensions of the 1960s! Both historians of international relations and immediate witnesses to those events remember how close the world was to an outbreak of military action. The scandal with the American spy plane in 1960, the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and, above all, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 brought the world to the brink of total war. These alarming events were known even in the most rural parts of Ukraine. Mikhail's parents (his mother was a school teacher and his father was a farm machinery operator) took the opportunity to reduce his age by half a year on his birth certificate. This way they planned to postpone his compulsory military service by a year. Well, fortunately, wise heads calmed the political tensions; yet changing the data back in Mikhail's passport turned out to be a far trickier challenge –

there was the risk that charges would be brought against his parents for forgery...

Mikhail spent his childhood and school years in a village called Gvozdavka-1 in the northern part of the Odessa region (around 250 km from Odessa itself). The village had actually been a focal point of military action a number of times during World War II (maybe this explains Zinar's parents' fear). There was a time when Gvozdavka, split in two by the River Kodyma, straddled the border between the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire. That is how the pair of villages Gvozdavka-1 and Gvozdavka-2 arose. The Romanians built a concentration camp in Gvozdavka-2 (alternatively known as Hvozdvka Druha) during World War II, to which Jews were deported to meet their death from southern Ukraine, Bessarabia, Moldavia and Romania.

As a schoolboy young Misha dreamed of becoming a pilot – as did just about all the village lads! The children were captivated by the example of a modest young man called Yuri Gagarin from a village in the Smolensk region, who went on to become the first man in space.

After graduating from school with very solid marks (a silver medal in Soviet schooling terms) in 1968 Zinar applied for a place at the Kiev Civil Aviation Flying Institute. However, his dreams of

flying were dispelled by a banal medical examination: the meticulous doctors found problems with his eyesight. It proved somewhat harder, though, to separate Mikhail from his dream! Taking the advice of a retired pilot, the lad got a place at the Egorevsk Civil Aviation Flying and Engineering Institute located in the Moscow region. The plan was simple: graduates from the institute could easily retrain as pilots after working for two or three years at an airport, with the minimum of requirements. "By that time, my eyesight problems will have been fixed," Mikhail thought. "Medicine keeps making progress!"

Alas, the power of dreams is sometimes too fragile. After graduating the newly-qualified aircraft mechanic was sent to work at Simferopol airport in the Crimea. Two years of service on the ground passed by imperceptibly and his eyesight considerably improved. Zinar had already begun to collect the documents required to train as a pilot when, suddenly...

One spring weekend the lad was walking in the Yuri Gagarin(!) Park in Simferopol and dreaming of his future glorious pilot studies. The world of aviation incurred a terrible loss and the kingdom of Caissa experienced a fantastic gain when Zinar stumbled upon an open pavilion in the park with people playing chess!

Chess! This became Zinar's life obsession. In just half a year he made the journey from absolute beginner to first category player (1800 plus). After that, it was onwards and upwards. With the wish to focus entirely on chess, our hero changed jobs in 1974. This wasn't a fair exchange! Only an incurable romantic would agree to give up a position of aviation mechanic with free accommodation in a dormitory and a salary of 130 rubles per month (a very decent amount in those days) in favor of a salary of 90 rubles per month and no accommodation as a coach at a children's chess club! The chess atmosphere now literally encircled our hero 24/7. Locking the doors at night after the last chess club member had left the premises, Zinar would move tables together, pull a mattress and bed linen from the cupboard and settle down for the night. The following morning the same procedure would take place in reverse...

In his breakthrough year of 1974 Mikhail made his debut on the chess studies scene. This is a story all by itself! At the beginning of his career Zinar bought a second-hand book. By chance it was a volume from the famous Russian-language *Chess Endings* series (1956) edited by grandmaster Yuri Averbakh. The lad was enraptured in the pawn endgames section by these strange diagrams with numbers. The notes to the diagrams alluded to some mysterious "corresponding squares". His love

of mathematics forced him to examine deeply these odd-looking annotations. Naturally, he understood nothing at first. After reading them for a second time he realized that the theory was incomplete. So he sat down and wrote his own! In fact, the work of this young reformer was later included in the volume on pawns in the second edition of *Chess Endings* (1983). In the foreword, Averbakh wrote: “Chapter ten, devoted to corresponding square systems, was written by chess composer M.A. Zinar – a big specialist in pawn endings. Otherwise, this chapter would have looked out of date.”

By filling in gaps in the theory of corresponding squares Mikhail began to compose positions that explained the essence of his innovations. By that time, Filip Bondarenko’s Russian-language book *A Study in Pawn Endings* had been published. Comparing his examples with the opuses from that book, Zinar satisfied himself that his illustrations of the theory of corresponding squares were just as good.

In this way, Mikhail suddenly realized that he had been composing studies all of this time! The magazine *Chess in the USSR*, famous for its studies, published Zinar’s first actual composition. Speaking to me on the phone, he recalled “There was absolutely nothing special about this study! It had all been seen earlier... It was really the editor of the *Compositions* section, Anatoly Kuznetsov,

giving me some sort of advance for my future pawn discoveries. He had a great nose for talent... apologies for my big head!”

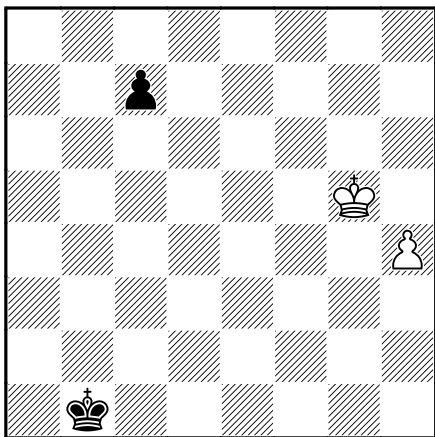
The 1970s were the Golden Age for the ancient game in the USSR. Chess clubs sprung up everywhere and the Crimean peninsula was equally struck by the fever of Caissa. A chess club opened in Feodosia, a Black Sea city in the Crimea, in the early 1980s, and Mikhail was appointed its director. His job drove his creativity further! In order to prove this with a study, for now I will leave the Crimea and head for Kiev.

Indeed, the 1980s were another Golden Age – for chess composition in Ukraine! That had much to do with the late Soviet master of sport in chess composition Vladimir Mikhailovich Archakov, a great chess enthusiast, who had moved to Kiev from Volgograd. I have counted columns in fifteen different Ukrainian periodicals that Archakov maintained! This Figaro of the chess world shook up big time the chess scene of the Ukrainian capital. Taking advantage of his imposing appearance and civil aviation pilot’s well cut uniform Vladimir Mikhailovich opened the doors of the newspapers’ and magazines’ editorial offices with ease. The apex of his organizational genius was seen during the powerful chess composition challenge held to honor Kiev’s 1,500th anniversary. The competition









received 80 classical studies from many famous authors. Participants included study titans such as Gia Nadareishvili, Ernest Pogosiants and Vasily Dolgov. However, all of these iconic names, acknowledged masters of chess studies with various pieces on the board, were brushed aside by the first category player Mikhail Zinar with his narrow focus on pawns. Study No. 45 in the book you are reading won this wide-ranging contest. I am willing to assert that this masterpiece was responsible for putting a new king on the vacant pawn endings throne! My assertion is backed up by the fact that Zinar was awarded the title of master of sport in chess composition following the 16th individual USSR chess composition championship, which was based on studies created in 1981–82. That was a unique case in Soviet chess history when a first category player made it straight to master's level without gaining the title of candidate master inbetween! No less amazing is the fact that just eight years had passed between the publication of his first study and his widescale recognition. Usually it takes many more years to become recognized as a classic!












However, starting from November 1989 Zinar's creative output nosedived. In 1990 the master composed just eight studies, and in 1991 his stream of pawn exhibitions totally dried up...



No. 1. M. Zinar
Chess in the USSR, 1985



White to move and win

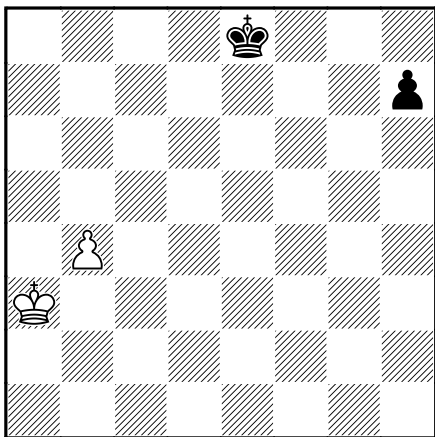
It's easy to calculate that pawn moves alone save black: 1.h5? c5 2.h6 c4 3.h7 c3 4.h8= c2, and a draw. So instead, white's king needs to challenge the black pawn. But how? Not 1.f5? c5 2.e4 c2! 3.d5 d3! (following Reti's example!) 4.xc5 (4.h5 c4) 4...e4, and the black king has made it to the square of the white pawn.

The only way to win is with **1.f4!! c5 2.e3!**
a2. Blocking his own pawn gets black nowhere:
 2...c2 3.h5 c4 4.h6 c3 5.h7 b1 6.h8= c2
 7.b8+ c1 8.b4 d1 9.d2#.

Trying to support his pawn by placing his king on the long diagonal still loses for black: 2...b2
 3.h5 c4 4.h6 c3 5.h7 c2 6.h8=+!

3.h5 c4 4.h6 c3 5.d3! b3 6.h7 c2 7.d2!
b2 8.h8=+! White wins.

No. 2. M. Zinar
Chess in the USSR, 1985



White to move and draw

At first glance, white cannot catch the black pawn 1.♔b3? h5 2.♔c4 h4 3.♔d4 h3 and so on. Maybe a reciprocal march of the white pawn can save the game? Alas, he is clearly too slow: 1.b5? h5 2.b6 ♖d7 3.♔b4 h4 and so on.

The king's side maneuver saves the day: **1.♔a4!! ♖d7**. Or 1...h5 2.♔a5! ♖d7 3.♔a6! and so on following the main solution.

2.♔b5!! Reti's famous maneuver in action! Not 2.♔a5? ♖c7!! 3.♔a6 ♖b8, and the black pawn's march is decisive.

Instead of 2...♖c7!! it would be a mistake to play 2...♖c8? 3.♔b6!! (again following Reti!) 3...h5 (3...♖b8 4.♔c6) 4.♔a7 h4 5.b5 and the pawns are promoted simultaneously.

2...h5. After 2...♖c7 3.♔c4(c5)! the white king makes it to the square of the black pawn!

3.♔a6! ♖c7 4.♔a7 ♖c6 5.♔a6. A draw.