

Korchnoi Year by Year

Volume III (1981-1991)

Hans Renette and Tibor Karolyi

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Authors: Hans Renette and Tibor Karolyi

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov

Cover photos: Black and white photo – Korchnoi playing at Eindhoven, 1982, taken by and courtesy of Jos Suttmuller; color photo – Korchnoi playing Kasparov in London at the 1983 candidates semi-final, courtesy of the Garry Kasparov archive

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Playing Richard Meulders, Brussels, 1987. Photo taken by Tom Fürstenberg, courtesy of Richard Meulders

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Introduction

Throughout the year 1980, Viktor Korchnoi had wrestled through another tough candidates cycle and emerged as Karpov's challenger again in the early days of the following year. Months of intense play and great form were followed by a most disappointing match: Korchnoi stood no chance on the board, while those hoping for as much sensation as in Baguio were disappointed as well.

After the Merano match, the paths of Karpov and Korchnoi separated again as the Soviet boycott stopping one of them from playing in the strongest tournaments still persisted. However, their relations more or less normalised in the second half of the decade. Early in 1986, they could still be seen ignoring each other at Vienna. Yet later in the year, they were playing bridge together.

The candidates matches of 1983 saw Kasparov finally blocking Korchnoi's way to another title attempt. It was a turbulent episode, as initially the future world champion was forfeited. Korchnoi granted him the match after all, and in the following year he saw the boycott against him finally lifted. In the subsequent years, Korchnoi kept on emerging in the candidates matches (and tournament). At first, he was seeded, but in 1988 and 1991 he only made it after surviving two strong Interzonals. Korchnoi remained a welcome guest at tournaments of the highest order and, though his results were steady, he was no longer a challenger to the best two players of those days – Karpov and Kasparov.

Petra Leeuwerik remained loyally at Korchnoi's side. Daniel Jakobs relates how he saw their relationship: "With regard to Petra, we must once again take the context into account. Viktor made the decision to abandon a totalitarian regime, and at that moment you must fully trust someone who can help you. It is a life or death decision in the literal sense. Once he left the USSR he had to be very cautious with all new relationships. On the other hand, geniuses (Viktor was one in chess) are usually brilliant at what they do, but they frequently lack the usual basic habits, often due to lack of interest, and there must be someone to meet them. They do not function well in social life, because their thoughts are almost unidirectional. There are many examples of these cases in athletes, dancers, chess players, artists, etc. Petra was that trustworthy person, who was able to amalgamate both situations. Like Viktor and for very understandable reasons, she deeply hated the USSR and everything it represented and all those who represented it. Not having gone through such an experience, I do not feel in a position to criticise. Petra was a person who suffered a lot, who found in Viktor's struggle her leitmotiv and intended to defend him against the outside world. I understood deep down what her goal was, but her ways were very complicated. She was an aggressive person in defence of Viktor, she was a lioness taking care of her cub. Obviously, this behavior earned her the hate of everyone. Greys did not exist

for her, everything was black or white, nothing was negotiable. Her obstinacy and extremism led us many times to internal and external problems. But I think that this special and complicated person must be put in context and we must understand the environment and the time. She defended Viktor with her weapons and was faithful to him in the defence of his interests. Her ways and manners were very shocking and unpleasant. She was a resentful person towards everything that for them were ‘their enemies’, and in the constant struggle she found a way to preserve herself and Viktor.”

Korchnoi’s lawyer, Alban Brodbeck, was also in his private circle. As we’ll see, he was closely involved in the arrival of Korchnoi’s wife and son in the West in 1982 and got to know the man from that side as well. His opinion of Korchnoi (a crackhead) and Petra (a witch) is more to the point: “It wasn’t at all difficult for me to separate from these two in 1982, because I never had a collegial, friendly and decent relationship with either of them and never intended to enter into one, as that is simply not possible with these two egoists. Korchnoi has never had a friend throughout his entire life, because he is incapable of friendship and collegiality and the self-promoter and manic egoist Petra belongs to the same category.”

The reunion of Viktor and his family was disastrous and a cold shower for the latter. They at once got to know Korchnoi’s new partner at first hand and a painful separation followed. It turned out that there was just that one passion, chess, which superseded any relation Korchnoi had with the outside world.



Korchnoi and Timman during their first match game, Hilversum, 1982 (Nationaal Archief)

court rejected his case. Despite the bitter blow that cost him much time and legal fees, Korchnoi let the period in which he could appeal, which ran until 5 November, elapse.

On 1 October, all was set for the first game. Lots had been drawn and resulted in Korchnoi beginning with White. Like the 1978 match, the victor would be the first to win six games, with draws not counting. There was no handshake and the same was seen when the first game began. Korchnoi arrived first and completely ignored his opponent. Judging from the applause, the public was more on the challenger's side. Despite playing White, Korchnoi quickly got into trouble and Karpov outplayed him in the middle game. Korchnoi resigned before adjournment and full of disgust. Two days later, he tried to surprise Karpov in the opening but it was soon apparent that the champion's preparation had been top-notch.

Korchnoi then blundered in a complicated middle game. He resumed the adjourned second round game but a second loss was unavoidable. After this game, Korchnoi and Petra moved to Algund, where they could reside in a quieter environment. A postponement was expected by Korchnoi but he did not request it. Game three was a tedious affair that logically ended in a draw, but it didn't pass without incident. In defiance of the agreed rules, Karpov addressed his opponent directly to offer a draw. Korchnoi turned pale, left the board for a minute, returned and, calling Karpov "citizen" in a denigrating fashion, told him to speak via the arbiter. Two moves later, a draw was thus agreed.

Korchnoi's opening choice in the fourth game – a Petroff – seemed to suggest a lack of ambition. For Bent Larsen, though, it was a herald of Karpov's success, as it confirmed his claim that Korchnoi had no reply against Karpov's 1.e4. Yet Korchnoi emerged from the opening with total equality, but was then betrayed by his own obduracy: on move 23 Karpov would have offered any other top player in the world a draw, but the rule to make the offer via the arbiter that Korchnoi insisted on observing (together with the challenger's uncertain play up to that point) held Karpov back and he continued to make moves. Then, suddenly and without any justification, Korchnoi began to play for a win. He promptly made mistakes and got into a hopeless position that Karpov played out without any difficulty on the following day. When Korchnoi resigned, he signed his scoresheet and "contemptuously flipped it over the time clock to Karpov's side of the table."

This devastating loss had a big impact on his bewildered seconds. They approved of his opening but then,

"For the first time since I've been Viktor's second," said Stean, "I wanted to stand up and say, 'Stop! Let me play the rest of the game!' I felt everything was going wrong. Every move had something wrong with it. A series of mistakes, and I felt totally helpless. It is so sad, so baffling, so depressing. It's as if someone had put something in his coffee. If Viktor were a horse, he'd be dope-tested."
[*Sports Illustrated*, 19 October 1981]

Some journalists queried Korchnoi about a possible forfeit after such a debacle, but he refused to give in and, at least in front of the cameras, kept on holding to the conviction that he'd be victorious. When confronted with criticism of his play – Najdorf, who was commentating in Merano, claimed that he was playing “coffee house chess” – Korchnoi hit back as hard as ever, calling Najdorf “an old man and not a competent commentator.”¹

After game four, Korchnoi secretly left Merano to spend some time in Switzerland. Around the same time, his team was set to be reinforced as Shamkovich, an excellent analyst, was on his way. Game five ended in a peaceful draw. It was followed by a sensational sixth game which saw the challenger's first win – and Shamkovich's hand could already be seen in the opening novelty which Korchnoi demonstrated. The game was a fascinating fight in which Korchnoi played intrepidly, going for a sharp counter attack in his favourite Open Ruy Lopez. And yet, everything could have fallen apart in time trouble when Korchnoi made a serious blunder. Karpov, despite having more than enough time, answered instantly and thus dug his own grave.

Game 335

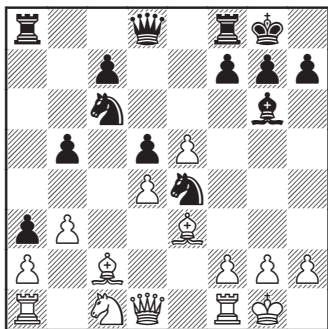
A. Karpov – V. Korchnoi

World Championship Final

Merano (6), 1981

Ruy Lopez (C82)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6
4.♙a4 ♗f6 5.0-0 ♖xe4 6.d4 b5
7.♙b3 d5 8.dxe5 ♙e6 9.c3 ♘c5
10.♗bd2 0-0 11.♙c2 ♙f5 12.♗b3
♙g6 13.♗fd4 ♙xd4 14.cxd4 a5
15.♙e3 a4 16.♗c1 a3 17.b3



17...f6

Korchnoi plays a new move. One year earlier, Yusupov played 17...♗b4 against Romanishin. That game ended in a draw. Breaking up the pawn chain is correct, it comes at the right time. Black is ready to sacrifice the e4–knight for some pawns.

18.exf6

Karpov is cautious and avoids wild complications. It was not reasonable to opt for a sharp position that his opponent may have analysed deeply at home. If 18.f3 fxe5 19.fxe4 ♖xf1+ 20.♙xf1 exd4 Black has enough play for the piece.

18...♙xf6 19.♗e2 ♗b4 20.♙b1
♙e7

Korchnoi's pieces are highly active but must make progress, because if his play is neutralised the backward pawn may come under pressure. Geller thought that 20...♙ae8 was

1 *Schweizerische Schachzeitung*, October 1981, pp. 476-477. Taken from *Die Welt*.

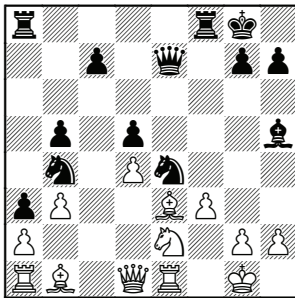
“far more active.” In fact, Korchnoi’s move and Geller’s suggestion are equally playable. For example, after 21. ♖c1 (21. ♖e1? c5!) 21...c5 22.f3 ♖e7! 23.fxe4 ♖xf1+ 24. ♔xf1 ♕xe4 25. ♖xc5 ♕xb1 26. ♖xe7 ♖xe7 27. ♕d2 ♕d3 28. ♕xb4 ♖xe2 29. ♖d1 the position is a draw.

21. ♖e1?

The queen targets the b4–knight while offering protection to the e3–bishop. Razuvaev suggested 21. ♖e1 and, indeed, Short played it against Timman in 1996. The Dutchman replied 21... ♗xf2 and drew that game after an exciting fight. Black could also attack in other ways, and those options look easier for him:

a) 21... ♖ae8 22.f3 (22. ♗f4 ♕f5) 22... ♗c5 with equality.

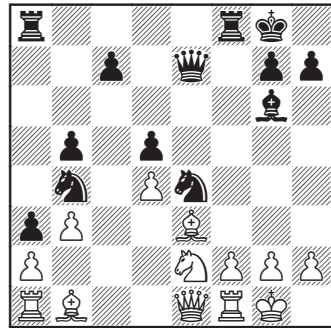
b) 21... ♕h5 22.f3 (22. ♖c1 ♗xf2 23. ♗f4 ♗g4 24. ♕d2 ♖f6 25. ♖c3 with equality)



b1) 22... ♖xf3! 23.gxf3 ♕xf3 24. ♕xe4 dxe4 25. ♖d2 ♖a6 26. ♗f4 ♗d3 27. ♗xd3 ♖g6+ 28. ♔f1 exd3 29. ♕f2 ♕g2+ 30. ♔g1 ♕c6+!! (not 30... ♕b7+?? 31. ♕g3 ♖d6 32. ♖e8+ ♔f7 33. ♖e3) 31. ♕g3 ♖d6 32. ♖xd3 ♖d5 with equal chances.

b2) 22... ♕xf3! 23.gxf3 ♖xf3 24. ♗f4 ♖g5+ 25. ♗g2 ♖g4 26. ♖f1

♖af8 27. ♖xf3 ♖xf3 28. ♖e1 h5 with equality.



21... ♖fe8

Geller suggested bringing the other rook to e8, and indeed many players would do that. It would be interesting to know what role Viktor planned for the a8–rook.

22. ♗f4

Hübner points out that 22. ♖c1? ♗xf2 23. ♖xf2 ♕xb1 would win for Black.

22... ♕f7

Black could also play 22... ♖a6 or 22... ♕f5.

23. ♖c1

Kasparov considers this move to be a demonstration of ambition. Karpov hoped to have time to play ♕e1 and f3. Below we consider some alternatives:

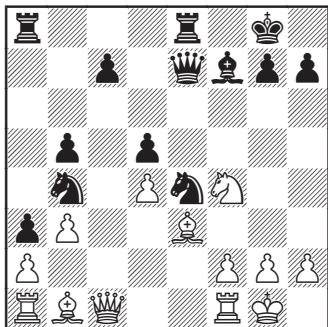
a) 23.f3

a1) 23... ♗d6 24. ♕f2 ♖xe1 25. ♕xe1 ♗c6 26. ♕f2 g5 and the position would be equal after 27. ♗d3 ♗f5 or 27. ♖c1 gxf4 28. ♖xc6 ♖e2.

a2) 23... ♗c3 24. ♕d2 ♖f6 25. ♖f2 ♗c6 26. ♕xc3 ♖xf4 27. ♕d3 ♖ab8 with equality.

b) Strong grandmasters Geller, Nunn and Suetin suggested

23. ♖d3, swapping off the strong knight on b4. 23... ♗xd3 (Kasparov suggested 23... ♗c6, which may lead to a repetition after 24. ♗f4 ♖b4 25. ♗d3) 24. ♕xd3 b4 25. ♕xe4 dxe4 26. ♖c1 ♖a5 and the position would be equal.



23...c5!

Korchnoi plays dynamically.

24.dxc5

Otherwise Black would push the c-pawn further. 24. ♕xe4 ♖xe4 25. ♖xc5 ♗c2 26. ♖ac1 ♖ec8! (Tal and Geller missed that attacking the queen with this rook is much stronger, whereas White resists after 26... ♖ac8 27. ♖xc2! ♖xc2 28. ♖xa3) 27. ♖xb5 (or 27. ♖xc2 ♖xc2, now the a-pawn is protected and Black wins) 27... ♗xe3 28. ♖xc8+ ♖xc8 29. fxe3 ♖xe3+ 30. ♔h1 ♖c1 and Black wins.

24...♖f6

Korchnoi attacks the rook and covers the d4-square.

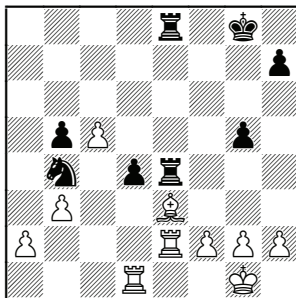
25. ♕xe4

Karpov eliminates the knight; he could also play 25. ♖d1 ♗c3 (Kasparov's 25... ♖ad8 would be fine as well) 26. ♕d4 ♗xd1 27. ♕xf6 gxf6 28. ♖xd1 ♖ac8 with equal chances.

25...♖xe4 26. ♗e2

According to Tal, Karpov had originally planned 26. ♖d2, but did not like 26... ♖b2! (Kasparov suggests 26... ♖ae8?, but misses the strong continuation for White 27. ♗e2 ♗c6 28. ♗c3 ♖h4 29. ♗xb5 when Black would be in big trouble)

a) 27. ♖fd1. According to Geller, "Black has nothing significant, and merely compensation for the pawn." However, White would have to find very difficult moves. 27... ♖ae8 28. ♖xb2 (Black would be able to press after 28.g3 ♗c6 29. ♗e2 ♗e5 30. ♔f1 ♗g4 31. ♕d4 ♖xe2) 28... axb2 29. ♖ab1 g5 30. ♗e2 ♕h5 31. ♖xb2 ♕xe2 32. ♖xe2 d4



33.a4!! White sacrifices the bishop to destroy enough pawns. 33... bxa4 34. bxa4 dxe3 (or 34... ♗c6 35. ♖de1) 35. ♖xe3 ♖xe3 36. fxe3 ♖xe3 37. ♖d8+ ♔g7 38. ♖d7+ ♔g6 39. c6 and White gets away with a draw.

b) 27. h4 ♖ae8 28. f3 ♖ex3 29. ♖xb4 h6 30. c6 with equal chances was a simpler solution for White.

c) The position would be equal after 27. c6 ♗xc6 28. f3 ♖ee8 29. ♗d3 ♖xd2 30. ♕xd2 as well, also a simpler solution.

26...d4

On 26 April, Korchnoi popped up in London where the Phillips & Drew Kings chess tournament was taking place. He had shared first place there in 1980, but now, with Karpov taking part, he hadn't been invited. Korchnoi, joined by protesters from the "Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry", hung a placard around his neck with the words "Let my son join me", reinforcing his request to allow his family to leave the Soviet Union. He also complained about his exclusion from the tournament. In the evening, Korchnoi helped Seirawan to prepare his game against Karpov the next day, and, much to Korchnoi's pleasure, the world champion got beaten.

At the end of May, Korchnoi travelled to Holland to take part in a team match between Volmac and Koningsclub (king's club) from Bergen op Zoom. The latter club was the vehicle of multi-millionaire Arnfried Pagel, who had the ambition to become champion and for this purpose let grandmasters fly back and forth from the United States. Korchnoi still played for Volmac – he was not to be lured by money to make a transfer – against Sosonko, losing one game and drawing the other. This surprising result was explained by the worries about his family, about whose fate Korchnoi showed himself quite pessimistic: after having had telephone contact with his son, there appeared little prospect of Igor getting a permit to leave the country.

It seemed that Korchnoi was doing all he could to get his wife and son released from the claws of the communist regime, but by the end of 1982, once they were firmly on western soil, it became clear that no happy family reunification would happen. A big interview with Korchnoi, which appeared in Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* on 31 December 1982, prompted the publication to posit "Life is not neat," for "the grandmaster has a new queen..."

Viktor's plan had been for his family to settle in New York. Sometimes he had the intention to leave Petra and go with them, while at other times he planned to stay with her in Switzerland and send his family to New York without him. They arrived in Vienna on 4 July 1982. Originally, they were due to leave the USSR a week earlier, on a day which Korchnoi had kept free, but the postponement of their journey meant that their arrival would now apparently coincide with a simultaneous engagement in Colmar, France from which Korchnoi, he insisted, could not free himself (Igor tells us "I would not be surprised if it was Petra who told him he could not free himself from it. Often Petra did something and later my father would claim that it was he who did it.")

There was also an event in Eindhoven on 3 July immediately after the French simul, however, which Korchnoi didn't mention in his account. Note that Colmar is also closer to Vienna than Eindhoven is. Back in 1980, there had been a clock simul in this Dutch city where Korchnoi met the local first team in an open air event. He scored more than half, 6.5-4.5, but was very unhappy with that result and wanted revenge. He asked the local club to

organise another exhibition, without requesting a fee. Only his travel costs and lodgings had to be taken care of. However, it wasn't until early July 1982 that he was able to gain revenge. The simul was again held in the open air and was part of the celebrations of Eindhoven's 750 years as a city. Korchnoi arrived a day in advance. He would play on ten boards, rather than eleven the previous time, and would have Black in three of those games.

One of his opponents was future International Master Gerard Welling, a fan of rather offbeat openings. Welling, who told us the whole Eindhoven story, recounted that he replied to Korchnoi's 1.e4 with his usual 1...♘c6. A complex game arose, Korchnoi got into trouble and he had to head for a bad endgame. His frustrations grew and grew until he offered a draw, which Welling refused in a friendly tone, believing he had good winning chances. As a result, he was treated with a typical Korchnoi tirade, the grandmaster fulminating that Welling didn't understand anything about the game, that the position was a draw and who did he think he was to refuse Korchnoi's offer. Welling made his move and Korchnoi neglected his board for a long time. Finally, Viktor continued the game, with little time left on the clock, snapping at Welling about whether he finally realised that he could not win this position. Welling by now had also lost some of his self-control, replied something like "Please show me" – and, much to Korchnoi's dismay, he could not do this. He left by chucking the pieces off the board. Welling left his board for a while and, when he returned, he discovered that his scoresheet had gone. An act of revenge or did someone else keep it as a memento? Korchnoi nevertheless improved on his score and beat the Eindhoven men 7-3.

The thing is, the Dutch amateurs knew about the fate of his family, who were due to arrive in Vienna on the next day, and they expected Korchnoi to change dates. But he didn't: this chess contest got his priority. Surprisingly enough, Korchnoi never mentioned this engagement to Igor and he only learned about it from our interviews in 2024.

Anyway, Brodbeck met and hosted them and this was, according to Korchnoi, enough for his son and wife to claim that Viktor refused to welcome his family. Rosa, Bella and Igor arrived with their dog (named U Thant after the former UN Secretary-General of the same name). Brodbeck allowed them to stay at his house for some days (this became two months) and Korchnoi visited them regularly. Over the years when she was still stuck in the USSR, he wrote in his autobiography, the number of letters he had exchanged with Bella had diminished. He could not drop them just like that, but they were no longer a family from his point of view. After staying in the German-speaking part of the country, Igor and his mother moved to Lausanne, as they could already speak French. Igor completed his studies in 1988. Continuing with Korchnoi's account, he and Bella began divorce proceedings, which lasted three years. Rosa found it too difficult to integrate and learn a new language, so she moved further away, to Israel. Bella found a job as

a translator but she caught a severe disease, which reminded Korchnoi of Mecking's. Her condition deteriorated badly and she died on 2 January 1995.

Well, how did Igor see all this? He told us the story from his angle: after the Merano match, he and his family finally obtained permission to leave the USSR. In the middle of May, he was released from the concentration camp. A couple of days later, he was back in Leningrad. Interviewed in the western press Bella declared: "We never despaired. We always thought we would win." Bella added that she was looking forward to meeting her husband again. Korchnoi reacted to the news through "his secretary". Petra recounted that he was very happy and looking forward to receiving them. He had, said Petra, prepared everything for them.

Igor Kortchnoi and Alban Brodbeck are quite explicit in denouncing the way Korchnoi and Petra represented the facts. Brodbeck wrote to us: "About the arrival of his family, Korchnoi did nothing to prepare for it and this is also the work of the schemer Petra. When Petra claims that Korchnoi was very happy to wait for the family in Switzerland, that is not true and when she says that he prepared everyone for the family, that is a damned lie of the first class. Korchnoi did nothing." Let's see in detail:

On 4 July 1982, Alban Brodbeck confirmed to us, Bella, Igor, Rosa and U Thant arrived in Vienna. Reporters noticed a yellow button on Igor's shirt with which he made a plea for separated families to be allowed reunification. But, indeed, there was no Viktor in sight. Instead, Brodbeck himself met them. He found the exiles astonished and disappointed by the grandmaster's absence, and had difficulty in convincing them to join him on a flight to Zurich. Igor adds that they were worried about falling into a trap by going to Switzerland when Viktor had promised them a new life in Manhattan. They had not predicted the immigration issues, though, that we mention below.

Brodbeck gave them some hope that Korchnoi would meet them in Zurich, but this didn't happen either. Also present in Zurich were Oleg Protopopov and Ludmila Belousova, two of Brodbeck's friends and clients, who had left the USSR a few years earlier.

Igor and his family continued their way to Brodbeck's house, in Glarus, in the mountains, "where the world ends", by car. Here at least, they were expecting to see Viktor. Around midnight, Korchnoi finally called Brodbeck from a phone box in Glarus. He said that Petra was with him. Against his lawyer's explicit advice, a meeting followed promptly, in the presence of Petra. She wanted to be there because she claimed to have fought for the liberation of Korchnoi's family. The meeting was disastrous and Brodbeck finally brought Petra to her hotel. Bella hadn't given her a glance at all.

Igor continues: "Viktor was giving a simul at France. He couldn't postpone – to hell with his family! In the evening he came with Petra. All evening she