

Tilburg University

Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik

van den Herik, H.J.; Herschberg, I.S.

Published in:
ICCA Journal

Publication date:
1995

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van den Herik, H. J., & Herschberg, I. S. (1995). Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik: An obituary. *ICCA Journal*, 18(2), 90-91.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

NEWS, INFORMATION, TOURNAMENTS AND REPORTS

MIKHAIL MOISEIVICH BOTVINNIK: AN OBITUARY

H.J. van den Herik¹ and I.S. Herschberg²

With the decease of Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik, chess has lost one of its most colourful figures. His versatility may be read off from his biography as a chess master. Born in Saint Petersburg in 1911, Botvinnik won the World Championship three times and simultaneously achieved great distinction as an electrical engineer and as a planner in energy matters. For his achievement in the latter field, he was decorated at the end of World War II. He was a many-time chess champion of the USSR and established himself on the international scene after drawing a match with Flohr in 1933.

He was unstoppable afterwards: in the AVRO tournament of 1938 he was a close third behind Fine and Keres. The war confined him to his home country, but he was victorious at Groningen, The Netherlands in 1946 and in Moscow in 1947. The world title became his in the memorable tournament The Hague / Moscow 1948. He defended his title successfully against Bronstein (1951) and Smyslov (1954), losing it to Smyslov (1957) only to regain it in 1958. Temporarily he lost the title to Tal in 1960, only to win it again the next year. As a World Champion he lost the title to Petrosian in 1963 for good, FIDE rules at that time not entitling him to a return match.

After the loss of his title, he turned his attention to the areas of computerized planning and computer chess, which, in his view, had many facets in common. He wrote several books (among which *Computers, Chess and Long-Range Planning* (1970) and *Computers in Chess: Solving Inexact Search Problems* (1984)), which sold very well and were translated into many languages on the strength of his being a former World Champion. It is of undoubted merit that he brought the computerization of chess – *in posse* if not *in esse* – to the attention of the public at large. He did so as a successful presenter of radio programmes in his native country and at many spectacular appearances in the wider world, especially in Germany and The Netherlands.

Among his many honorifics, Botvinnik was a Vice-President of the Committee for Cultural Relations between the then Soviet Union and The Netherlands. Riding this track, he visited The Netherlands often, with large attendances following him in his widely reported presentations.

The *ICCA Journal* is happy to record that when its Editor-in-Chief first visited him in his Moscow apartment in 1978, Mikhail was quick to express his sympathy for co-operation with IBM, Professor Euwe and the Delft University of Technology, the common bond being an expressed interest in computer chess. We note gratefully that, in consequence of this informal bond, Botvinnik graced the first issue of this *Journal* (Vol. 6, No. 3) with a contribution, lending his name to the successor of the previously rather obscure *ICCA Newsletter*.

The establishment of this bond brought Mikhail repeatedly to Dutch venues. We recall, if only to demonstrate his particular brand of coloration, his provocative proposal, enunciated in Delft in April 1985, to reschedule the entire Soviet-Union into three shifts with the obvious advantage of equalizing the energy consumption over all 24 hours of the day!

Later, in June/July 1993 in Maastricht, Botvinnik was invited to contribute to the Advances in Computer Chess Conference and was hailed by the University authorities as an eminent chess-player and as a pioneer in computer chess. He declined the compliments, describing himself as "no more than a modest researcher in the field".

¹ University of Limburg, Department of Computer Science, P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands.
Email: herik@cs.rulimburg.nl.

² Delft University of Technology, Department of Computer Science, Julianalaan 132, 2628 BL Delft, The Netherlands.

Botvinnik's contributions in the pages of this *Journal* and elsewhere have been open to more controversy than agreement. His protracted distinction between the notions of algorithms and programs, while he consistently refused to discuss anything as specific as a program, alienated him from the computer-chess community.

At least one of his publications in this *Journal* (Vol. 16, No. 2) raised ruckus among the normally sedate perusers of these pages. It pretended to be able to re-play some of Botvinnik's own magisterial moves as well as to improve on the actual play of Kasparov against Ribli (1989). It was savagely attacked; not without reason, we think.

As your Editors believe, it is not the least of Botvinnik's merits to have raised the ruction at all. He saw himself as a literal pioneer guiding humanity on its way to what he considered to be a better world, his view of this world naturally being coloured by a life-long immersion in communist thought. While we may disagree with that mode of thought, it behooves us to admit its colourfulness, which has notably decreased with the death of Mikhail Moiseivich Botvinnik.

We recall a Latin tag: *posterii mirentur nos tam aperta nescisse* (those coming after us will wonder that we have not known such obvious truths). This applies most appropriately to Botvinnik who was and will remain forever a pioneer on the path to established truths in computer chess.