

The “Vera Menchik Club” and Beyond

by IM Nikolay Minev

Vera Menchik (1906-1944) was the first Women’s World Champion, reigning from 1927 to 1944, when she, her mother and sister were killed during an air raid in London. As World Champion, Vera Menchik dominated convincingly in all women’s tournament and matches. If you are interested, you can find many more details for her life and chess career in many magazines and other publications, but this is not my intention here. In this article I will try to show an almost forgotten fact of her career that changed today’s chess life for all of us. With this idea in mind, I’d like to give the first words to English “Encyclopedia of Chess” by Anne Sunnucks:

“The first woman ever to play in the British Championship and the first to play in a master tournament, Vera Menchik made her debut in master chess at Scarborough 1928 when she scored 50%. The following year she played in Paris and Carlsbad, and it was in Carlsbad that the famous “Vera Menchik Club” was formed. The invitation to Vera Menchik to compete among such players as Capablanca, Euwe, Tartakower and Nimzovich was received with amusement by many of the masters. The Viennese master Becker was particularly scornful, and in the presence of a number of the competitors he suggested that anyone who lost to Vera Menchik should be granted membership of “Menchik Club” He himself became the first member. Other famous players who later joined the club were Euwe, Reshevsky, Sultan Khan, Sir George Thomas, C.H.O’D Alexander, Colle and Yates.”

Her greatest success in international tournaments was at Ramsgate in 1929, when she was =2nd with Rubinstein, half a point behind Capablanca and ahead of Maroczy. In 1934 she was 3rd in Maribor, ahead of Spielmann and Vidmar. In 1942 she won a match against Mieses +4-1=5.”

Below are presented two of Menchik’s wins against high-level men. The first is against Euwe, the most famous member of the club, who Vera Menchik beat twice, in Hastings 1930/31 and Hastings 1931/32. The second is a miniature against IM William Winter (1898-1955), chess professional and British Champion in 1935 and 1936.

Queen’s Gambit D63

Max Euwe

Vera Menchik

Hastings 1930/31

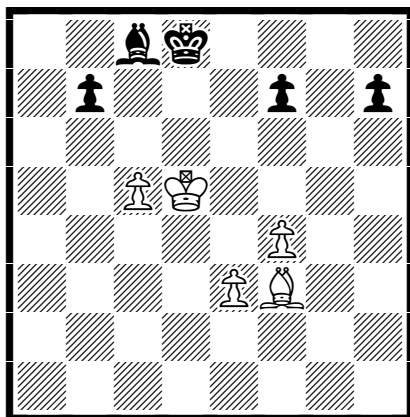
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Bg5 Nbd7 5.e3 Be7 6.Nf3 O-O 7.Rc1 a6 8.cxd5 exd5 9.Bd3 c6 10.O-O Ne4 11.Bf4 Nxc3 12.Rxc3 Re8 13.Qb1 Nf8 14.b4 Ng6 15.Bg3 Bd6 16.a4 Bxg3 17.hxg3 Bd7 18.Rfc1 Qf6 19.b5 axb5 20.axb5 Rec8 21.Qc2 Qd8 22.bxc6 Rxc6 23.Rc5 Rxc5 24.dxc5 Ra5 25.Qb2 Qa8 26.Qb6 Nf8 27.Ne5 Ra1!

The correct decision! In this difficult position the exchange of the Rooks makes the defense easier.

28.Rb1 Rxb1+ 29.Bxb1 Be6 30.Kh2 Nd7 31.Nxd7 Bxd7 32.Qc7 Qc8 33.Qxc8+ Bxc8 34.Ba2 Be6 35.Kg1 Kf8 36.Kf1 Ke7 37.Ke2 Kf6 38.Kd3 Ke5 39.g4!?

The tempting 39.f4+ Kf5 40.Kd4 does not win, e.g. 40...Kg4 41.Bxd5 Bxd5 42.Kxd5 Kxg3 43.Kd6 Kxg2 44.Kc7 h5 45.Kxb7 h4 and both sides promote new Queens.

39...g5! 40.g3 Bxg4 41.f4+ gxf4 42.gxf4+?! Kf6 43.Bxd5 Bc8 44.Bf3 Ke7 45.Kc4 Kd8 46.Kd5



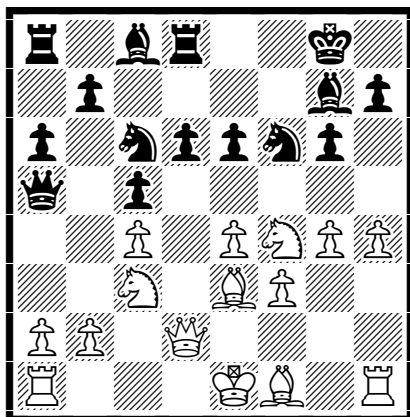
46...b6! 47.c6?

If 47.cxb6?? Bb7+, while 47.Kc4 leads to a draw.

47...Kc7 48.Ke5 Be6 49.f5 Bb3 50.Kf6 b5 51.Kg7 b4 52.Kxh7 Bc2 53.Kg7 b3 54.Bd5 b2 55.Ba2 Kxc6 56.f6 Kd6 57.e4 Bxe4 58.Kxf7 Bd5+ 59.Bxd5 b1=Q 60.Kg7 Qg1+ 61.Kf8 Kxd5 0-1

King's Indian E80
William Winter
Vera Menchik
Canterbury 1930

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.f3 c5 4.d5 Bg7 5.e4 d6 6.Nc3 O-O 7.Be3 Qa5 8.Qd2 Rd8 9.Nge2 a6 10.Nf4 e5 11.dxe6 fxe6 12.g4? Nc6 13.h4

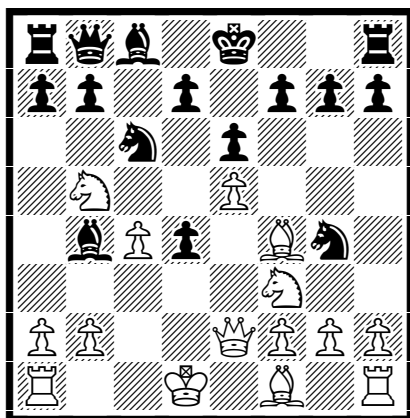


13...Nd4! 14.Qf2? e5! 15.Nfd5 Nxd5 16.exd5 Rf8 0-1

In the beginning the “Vera Menchik Club” was considered a joke. But very soon it became obvious that Menchik’s legacy – the idea that in chess the woman can compete on an equal basis against the men – was a reality. First, immediately after the Second World War, were a few timid, but encouraging attempts for participation in men’s tournaments. Let’s mention here the names of Chantal Chaude de Silans (who played 5th board for France in Men’s Olympiad 1950), Mme Renoy-Chevrier (who played 5th board for Monaco in Men’s Olympiad 1960) and Edith Keller-Hermann (who played in many local German men’s tournaments and also was invited to the Hastings B-Tournament). Here is one of her lovely miniatures:

Sicilian Defense B20
Kretschmer
Edith Keller-Hermann
 Dresden 1950

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.c4 e6 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.e5 Ng4 6.Qe2 Qc7 7.Nb5 Qb8 8.d4 cxd4 9.Bf4 Bb4+ 10.Kd1



10...d3! 0-1

White loses his Queen!

The things changed dramatically in the 60's and 70's, when many international tournaments began to be played with the Swiss System of pairing. Probably more important, Nona Gaprindashvili became Women World Champion in 1962. She played interesting and strong chess and, as Menchik, soon became a desired guest of men's major invitation tournaments, with bigger successes. Below are presented only very small number of examples of Nona's victories against masters.

Sicilian Defense B23

Nona Gaprindashvili

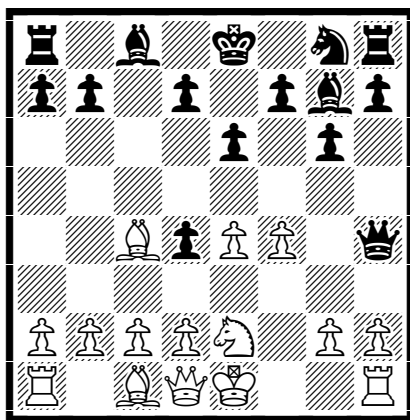
Alexandar Blagidze

Georgia (ch) Tbilisi 1963

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.f4 g6 4.Bb5!?

Usual is 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Bc4.

4...Nd4 5.Bc4 Bg7 6.Nge2 e6 7.Nxd4 cxd4 8.Ne2 Qh4+



9.Ng3!?

A bold decision! Sacrificing the f4-pawn and hoping for attacking chances along the open f-file. 9.g3 Qh3 creates some problems.

9...Qxf4

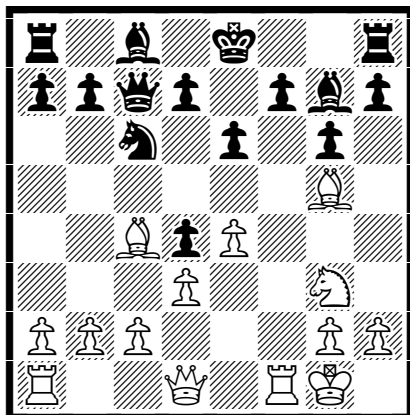
If 9...Nf6 or 9...Nh6, then not 10.O-O? Ng4, but 10.Qf3! with a better game.

10.d3 Qc7?!

Perhaps 10...Qh4 offers better resistance.

11.O-O Ne7 12.Bg5 Nc6?

This overlooks White's attractive tactical possibility. Necessary was 12...d6.



13.Nh5! gxh5 14.Rxf7!! Qe5

If 14...Kxf7 15.Qxh5+ Kg8 (15...Kf8 16.Rf1+) 16.Qe8+ Bf8 17.Rf1 and wins.

15.Rf5! 1-0

Because of 15...exf5 16.Qxh5+ Kf8 17.Qf7#

Sicilian Defense B44

D. V. Mardle

Nona Gaprindashvili

Hastings 1964/65

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 e6 5.Be3 Nf6 6.Nd2 e5! 7.Nxc6

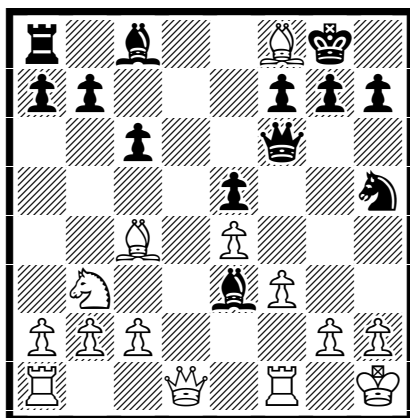
If the Knight retreats, then 7...d5!

7...dxc6 8.f3 Be7 9.Bc4 O-O 10.O-O Nh5 11.Nb3 Bg5 12.Bc5 Qf6!

Setting a tactical trap.

13.Bxf8 Be3+ 14.Kh1?

Falls into the trap. Naturally White was obligated to play 14.Rf2, but after 14...Bxf2+ 15.Kxf2 Kxf8 Black keeps a slightly better position..



14...Ng3+! 0-1

For if 15.hxg3 Qh6#

Sicilian Defense B39

Nona Gaprindashvili

R. Servaty

Dortmund 1974

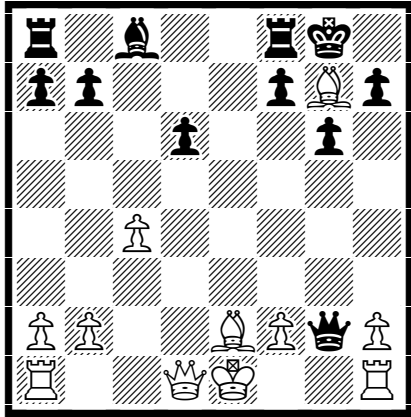
1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 g6 5.c4 Bg7 6.Be3 Nf6 7.Nc3 Ng4 8.Qxg4 Nxd4 9.Qd1 e5 10.Nb5! O-O 11.Be2!?

An interesting idea, used for the first time in this game. The common 11.Qd2 is also considered a good continuation.

11...Qh4

Pytel recommended 11...Nxb5 12.cxb5 d6 but, in my opinion, after 13.Bc4 Be6 14.Qb3! White stands better.

12.Nxd4 exd4 13.Bxd4 Qxe4 14.Bxg7 Qxg2?

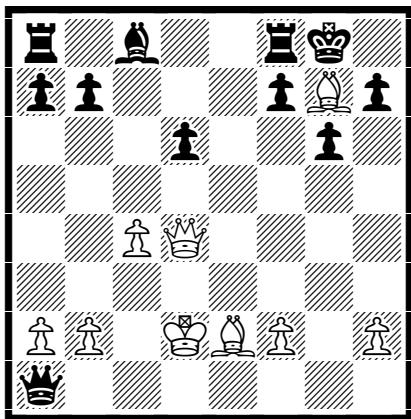


15.Qd4!!

A historical move and idea!

15...Qxh1 16.Kd2 Qxa1?

Instead 16...Qc6 17.Bxf8 Kxf8 18.Re1 f6 19.c5! (intending 20.Bb5!) d5 20.cxd6 leads to a clear advantage to White. According to Pytel, Black should play 16...Qxh2!? unclear, but it seems that here again 17.Bxf8 Kxf8 18.Re1! gives White a very strong attack.



17.Qf6!! 1-0

The point of White's tactical idea. Wrong would be 17.Bh6? f6. After the move in the game, there is no defense against 18.Bh6.

**Queen's Gambit Accepted D26
Nona Gaprindashvili**

Maxim Dlugy
Brussels 1987

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.Nf3 a6 4.e3 e6 5.Bxc4 c5 6.Qe2!?

A variation introduced by S. Furman.

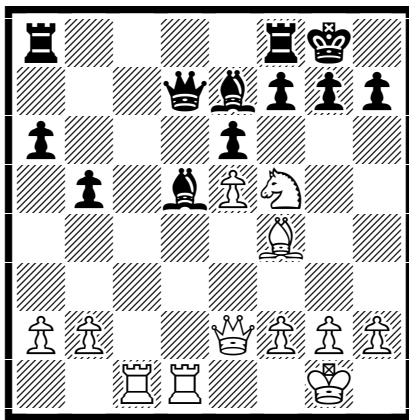
6...Nf6 7.dxc5 Bxc5 8.O-O Qc7 9.e4!

The point of the variation. White achieves more space and better chances.

9...Nc6 10.e5 Nd7 11.Bf4 b5 12.Bb3 Be7 13.Nbd2 Nc5 14.Rac1 Nxb3 15.Nxb3 Bb7 16.Nfd4 Nxd4

Black is already in trouble. If 16...Qb6 17.Be3!

17.Nxd4 Qd7? 18.Rfd1 O-O 19.Nf5 Bd5



20.Rxd5!! 1-0

If 20...Qxd5 21.Nxe7+ or 20...exd5 21.Qg4! In both cases Black loses his Queen.

The example of Gaprindashvili emboldened hundreds women chess players to participated regularly in tournaments together with the men, which has become the familiar picture in all recent events. And not only that, we reached an historical peak when a woman reached a place between the top ten rated players in the world and she is invited to play in almost all the strongest competitions. Everybody knows that I'm speaking about Judit Polgar and her successes in last 15 years. Here are some of her convincing and amazing wins.

Petrov Defense C42
Judit Polgar
Anatoly Karpov
Wijk aan Zee 2003

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Be7 7.O-O Nc6 8.c4 Nb4 9.Be2!?

Instead of 9.cxd5 Nxd3 10.Qxd3 Qxd5 with approximately equal chances.

9...O-O 10.a3 Nc6 11.cxd5 Qxd5 12.Nc3 Nxc3 13.bxc3 Qd6

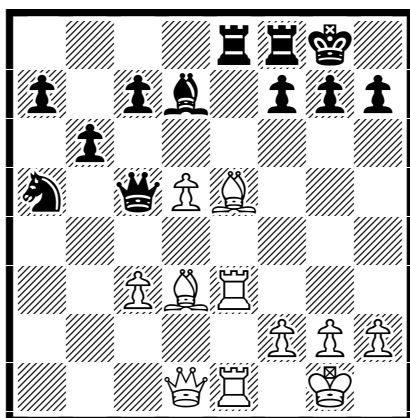
13...Bf5!?

14.Rb1! b6 15.Re1 Be6 16.Bd3 Rae8 17.Rb5!

A remarkable idea. Transferring this Rook to “e” file, White achieves a very strong initiative in the center and against the Kingside.

17...Na5 18.Rbe5! Nc6 19.R5e2 Bd7 20.d5! Na5 21.Ne5 Bf6 22.Bf4 Bxe5 23.Bxe5 Qxa3 24.Re3 Qc5

Black is already lost. If for example 24...g6, then 25.Qh5!!



25.Bxh7+ Kxh7 26.Qh5+ 1-0

Because of the typical tactics 26...Kg8 27.Bxg7 Kxg7 28.Rg3+ Kf6 29.Qg5#

French Defense C11

Judit Polgar

F. Berkes

Budapest 2003

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4. Bg5 dxe4 5.Nxe4 Be7 6.Bxf6 Bxf6 7.Nf3 O-O?!

The theory considers this premature and recommends 7...Nd7 8.Qd2 b6.

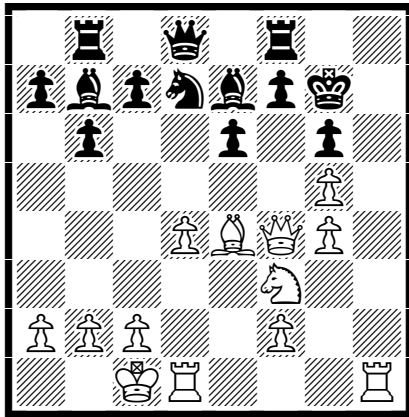
8.Qd2 Nd7 9.O-O-O Be7 10.Bd3 b6 11. Neg5 h6 12.Bh7+ Kh8 13. Be4 hxg5?

Expecting only 14.Bxa8 g4! and White loses another minor piece, Black fails into clever trap.

14.g4!! Rb8 15.h4 g6

If 15...gxh4 16.g5!

16.hxg5+ Kg7 17.Qf4 Bb7



18.Rh7+!! Kxh7 19.Qh2+ Kg8 20.Rh1 Bxg5+ 21.Nxg5 Qxg5+ 22.f4 Qxf4+ 23.Qxf4 Bxe4 24.Qxe4 1-0

Modern Defense B06

Judit Polgar

Alexey Shirov

Amsterdam 1995

1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 c6 4.Bc4 d6 5.Qf3!?

I remember this rare continuation from the following game E. Polihroniade – M. Ivanka

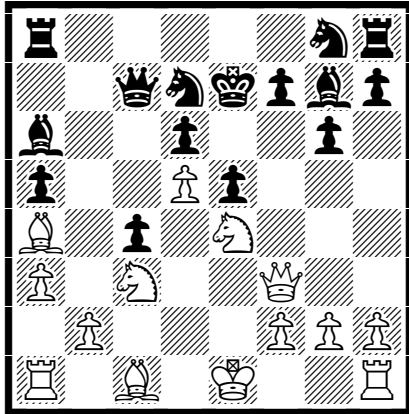
Skopje (ol Women) 1972 : 1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Bc4 d6 4.Qf3 Nf6 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Nge2 O-O 7.h3 a6 8.a4 Nd7 9.Be3 e5 10.Rd1 Kh8 11.h4 h6 12.Bg5! hxg5 13.hxg5+ Kg8 14.Qh3 Re8 15.Qh7+ Kf8 16.Nd5 Nxd4 17.Nxd4 exd4 18.Rd3 b5 19.Rdh3 f5 20.Qxg7+! 1-0

5...e6 6.Nge2 b5 7.Bb3 a5 8.a3 Ba6 9.d5 cxd5 10.exd5 e5 11.Ne4 Qc7 12.c4! bxc4

If 12...a4 13.Bd1!

13.Ba4+ Nd7 14.N2c3 Ke7?

Better is 14...Kf8, but after 15.Bc6 Rb8 16.a4 White retains strong initiative – Polgar.



15.Nxd6!! Qxd6 16.Ne4 Qxd5 17.Bg5+ Ndf6 18.Rd1 Qb7 19.Rd7+ Qxd7 20.Bxd7 h6 21.Qd1! 1-0

Grunfeld Defense D77

Vasily Ivanchuk

Judit Polgar

Linares 1997

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.g3 O-O 5.Bg2 d5 6.O-O Nc6 7.Nc3?!

A dubious gambit continuation. Alternatives of this experiment are .7.Ne5 dxc4 8.Nxc6 bxc6 9.Na3! unclear, or 7.cxd5 Nxd5 8.e4 Nb6 9.d5, transposing into the variations from games #21-22.

7...dxc4!

This position usually arises in practice from the following order of moves: 6...dxc4 7.Nc3?! Nc6!

8.d5 Nb4 9.e4

A novelty, instead of 9.Ne5 e6! 10.dxe6 Bxe6 11.Bxb7 Rb8 12.Bg2 Nfd5 13.Nxd5 Bxe5 14.Bf4 Bxb2! 15.Nxc7 Bf5 16.Nd5 Nxd5 17.Bxb8 Nc3 18.Qxd8 Nxe2+ 19.Kh1 Rxd8 20.Bc7 Rc8 21.Rae1 Rxc7 22,Rxe2 c3 23.g4 Bd3 0-1 Levenfish - Aronin, USSR (ch) 1948.

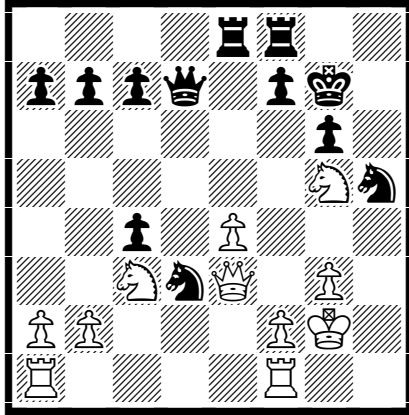
9...e6 10.Bg5 h6 11.Be3 Nd3 12.dxe6 Bxe6

White has no compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

13.h3 Qd7 14.Qd2

If 14.Kh2 b5!

14...Bxh3 15.Bxh6 Rae8 16.Bxg7 Kxg7 17.Ng5 Bxg2 18.Kxg2 Nh5 19.Qe3



19...Ndf4+! 0-1

For if 20.gxf4 Qg4+ 21.Kh2 Rh8 22.Nh3 Nxf4 , or 20.Kg1 Qg4 21.Nf3 Nxf3, or 20.Kh2 Rh8 21.gxf4 Qg4, or 20.Kf3 f6 21.gxf4 fxg5, and Black wins in all cases.

What about the future? Most likely, the time is quite near when will have only one world championship, instead of two separated for men and women. Perhaps!

Let me finish this article with a personal note. During my chess career I played against a dozen top level women chess players. And I'm proud that I didn't lose a single game. It is also correct that in 1958, in Tbilisi, I lost 3:0 against Gaprindashvili. But it was not in chess, but playing backgammon!