

# **Mikhail Tal: The Street-Fighting Years**

Alexander Koblenz

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**Author: Alexander Koblenz**

**Editor: Valeri Bronznik**

Translated from the Russian by Alexei Zakharov

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov ([www.elkov.ru](http://www.elkov.ru))

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## Foreword to the English Edition

When I started playing chess in March 1979 in Riga, everything about the game was associated with Mikhail Tal in my city. Especially a few months later, after Tal's victories in Montreal and the Riga Interzonal.

However, when you start you're not necessarily connected to the top yet. You play in your family, go to chess school and learn simple things about the game.

Being passionate about reading I tried not to miss any book or chess magazine from my father's library. For some reason, Tal and Damsky's book *Attack with Mikhail Tal* was not there but... the small book on Tal by Alexander Koblenz that you now hold in your hands turned out to be the perfect substitute!

A special memory from the book is those lines that might easily go unnoticed:

*After playing a tournament game, he would stay in the Riga chess club until late evening, giving improvised simultaneous displays and playing innumerable casual games.*

*Leaving the club late, Misha was full of excitement. With his cap askew and his coat fluttering in the wind, he would walk about the Riga streets with his friends, who were chess lovers as passionate as him.*

*"Of course, you should have played knight f3 to e5; if he captured that knight, a sacrifice on f7 would decide things..." The words, intelligible only to other chess players, rang in the air. The occasional passers-by would stop, look at those oddballs, and shake their heads in confusion...*

I vividly recall my own post-mortems. Did I stay in the chess school until everyone had finished? Of course I did! Would I also walk back with friends? Yes! But something was different. More than 30 years after Tal's teenage years Riga had grown into a pretty big city and the young players mainly lived in different districts. So we only managed a short exchange of words with an ice-cream and... tram number 6 or bus number 16 and so on. Until the next day. No deep analysis, everyone was just relying on their knowledge.

The most important part of Koblenz's book for me was my impatient desire to repeat Tal's path to the top, which reading the book sounded simple: even the game annotations looked easy. OK, today we see with the computer that those sometimes brief comments are not always accurate, but I believe that's of minor importance.

It was another 2-3 years before I got to know Koblenz, and a little later (still being extremely shy) Mikhail Tal himself. However, my path had been marked out much earlier and it was thanks to this book on Tal's street fights.

Thinking about the past, I realize that the biggest treasure that chess players possessed (and I was one of the last players to get the grandmaster title without computer preparation) was chess emotions. When searching for the truth, you knew that it might not be the ultimate truth, so emotions were the direct bridge from your knowledge to intuition.

The union of Alexander Koblenz and Mikhail Tal was a very emotional one, and reading the book you barely notice how hard their work together on chess was. You read short notes on Tal's almost irrational chess and only between the lines realize how accurately Koblenz and Tal analyzed positions of adjourned games (for example, against Spassky or Botvinnik), and how serious their opening preparation was. Koblenz didn't provide any concrete insights on how to become a grandmaster, he only wrote a sincere story which highly inspired me.

I am very happy that this old but highly instructive book is finally out in English. The old Russian edition has always been a special treasure for me and I truly enjoyed reading it through again (yes, the original version without editor's notes, though I have seen those as well) before writing these few lines.

**Alexei Shirov**, Riga,  
17 February 2021

## Introduction

The name of the ex-world champion Mikhail Tal is famous in the chess world. His games, rapid ascension and world championship win, and then the return match loss, have been widely discussed. The interest in the Riga grandmaster is understandable — no chess player before him has managed to climb to the very top of chess Olympus so soon.

Tal's successes were explained in various ways. Some talked about his special playing style and exceptional luck that accompanied him in tournaments. Others pointed out his "Mozart-like" lightness and even "demonic strength", which supposedly allowed him to achieve great success without much effort. I must immediately disappoint those who opened this book in search for sensations: no "Tal enigma" has ever existed. The talented player's way to the top was difficult and full of trials and tribulations. This book will tell you about the stages along this way, the wins and losses, the fulfilled hopes and disappointments.



## Twelve Years Ago

Assembly hall of Riga Middle School number 22. A thin boy with a shy smile approaches the demonstration board. He quickly moves a piece. Black's reply, another move – the solution is correct!

I remember that it wasn't the quickness of the solution that most impressed me, but a drastic change I saw in the boy as soon as he approached the board. He transformed completely. The smile on his face immediately disappeared, he became incredibly serious.

Later, I learned that Misha was a goalkeeper in his class football team, school checkers champion and one of the most active members of the Young Pioneers' Palace chess circle. He was also an avid piano player, his favorite composers being Tchaikovsky and Chopin.

The young Tal studied well, but his mathematics teacher was unhappy: Misha preferred to solve everything in his mind, without writing anything in the exercise book. However, he would make exceptions for the boys from senior classes who'd approach him during the break.

"Misha, quick, help me solve this!"

And, even though it was much more interesting to play football in the courtyard, he would pick up a pencil and quickly write down columns of numbers.

Tal's memory has been exceptional since childhood. During the 24<sup>th</sup> Soviet chess championship, master Aivars Gipslis and I jokingly asked Misha, "Do you remember which line Keres played in the Queen's Gambit against Boleslavsky in the third round of the 20<sup>th</sup> Soviet championship?"

"Stop pulling my leg," the grandmaster answered. "Boleslavsky played Keres in round 19, not round 3. It was Boleslavsky who had white, and he played the Ruy Lopez."

The passionate, selfless enthusiasm for chess struggle has never left Tal ever since he learned chess. After playing a tournament game, he would stay in the Riga chess club until late evening, giving improvised simultaneous displays and playing innumerable casual games.

Leaving the club late, Misha was full of excitement. With his cap askew and his coat fluttering in the wind, he would walk about the Riga streets with his friends, who were chess lovers as passionate as him.

"Of course, you should have played knight f3 to e5; if he captured that knight, a sacrifice on f7 would decide things..." The words, intelligible only to other chess players, rang in the air. The occasional passers-by would stop, look at those oddballs, and shake their heads in confusion...

And his mother would call the club yet again: "Do you know if Misha has

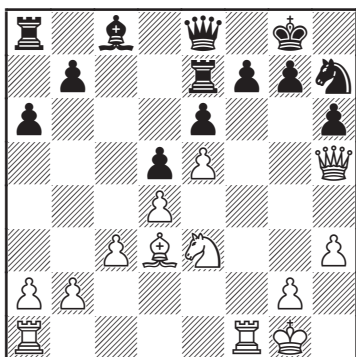
finished his game? He hasn't eaten his lunch yet..."

In one such evening, Misha managed to win a truly brilliant game. Here's the finale of the game played at the 1949 youth tournament in Riga.

### No. 1

M. Tal – A. Leonov

1949, Riga, Junior Tournament,  
round 7



### 19.♖f6!

A great blockading move. White parries the threat f7-f5 and, in his turn, threatens 20.♖xh6.

### 19...♗f8

19...♗xf6 didn't help, because after 20.exf6 gxf6 21.♗xh6 f5, white wins with 22.♘g4!. After 19...gxf6, there's 20.exf6 ♗xf6 21.♗xh6 ♗f8 22.♗xf6 ♖d7 23.♘g4 ♗g7 24.♗h4, with an unstoppable attack.

**Editor's note:** According to the computer, in the line shown by Koblenz black's play can be radically improved with 21...♗e4!! (instead of

21...♗f8, which is actually a mistake) 22.♗xe4 f5, and after 23.♗xf5 exf5 24.♘xd5 ♖e6 25.♗g5+ ♖g6 26.♘e7+ ♗g7 27.♘xg6 ♗xg6 28.♗e7+ ♗f7 black can hold. However, instead of 20.exf6, white should play 20.♗xh7+, which is winning – 20...♗xh7 21.♘g4 ♗f8 22.♖f1 f5 23.♘f6+ ♗h8 24.♖f3 (threatening ♖f3-g3-g8+) 24...♗g7 25.♖g3!+–.

20.♖f6! ♗d7 21.♘g4 ♗e8  
22.♘f6+! ♗xf6 23.exf6 ♖c7 24.fxg7  
♗xg7 25.♗e5+ Black resigned.

The passion for chess didn't stop Tal from graduating from high school ahead of time (he absorbed the whole elementary school program in just one year), and then from Latvian State University, where he majored in literature.

Tal already realized in his youth that to be successful in chess, it's necessary to work very hard. This means studying theory, analyzing games of masters and grandmasters, playing through your own games, and learning from your mistakes.

But he had no time for that. School during the days, tournaments in the evenings, so he could only study theory at night.

"Come to our home," Misha's father would invite me, "perhaps you can reason with him? He read chess books until morning again."

Once, during a walk, I seized the moment and tried to prove the importance of a correct daily regimen

## Gens Una Sumus

“We are one family”. These words from the ancient language of Latin comprise the motto of the International Chess Federation. We’re at the 14<sup>th</sup> Chess Olympiad in Leipzig. People are talking in different languages — German, Russian, English, French, Spanish, Mongolian, many others — but chess players need no translators: the universal language of chess can be understood by everyone.

At the reception organized by the East German government in honor of the chess players, Paul Keres spoke on behalf of the Olympians:

“Despite our opposing interests, there’s cordial friendship at the tournament of nations. I think that many should learn how to maintain the spirit of international solidarity here!”

The last words are drowned in applause. The American chess players approach the Soviet team’s table and raise their glasses in friendship — friendship between the chess players of all countries, friendship between all nations.

Bobby Fischer offers to tell Tal’s future.

“OK. Tell me, Bobby, how will the return match against Botvinnik end?” Tal asks.

Fischer looks intently at the world champion’s palm and says, “You don’t like to lose!”

“Who does?”

The loud laughter stopped Fischer’s palmistry session.

We made a lot of new friends in Leipzig. Chess people from many countries asked the Soviet players for advice, and shared their joys and sorrows with them.

We learned that free Cuba had revived the glorious chess traditions of Capablanca, that chess was becoming widely popular among the people.

“We are proud that our country gave chess to humanity,” said the Indian journalist Chandragupta Agrawal in a short interview. “After winning independence, our team is taking part in the team world championship. We are obviously weaker than players from many other countries, but we’ll do everything in our power to catch up.”

Bombay student Manuel Aaron proved that these weren’t empty words. In the match against the Netherlands, he defeated the ex-world champion Max Euwe, while in the Argentina match, he drew with grandmaster Miguel Najdorf.

The English and French chess players had a hard time believing that the Mongolian government had assigned a comfortable three-story building to a chess club.

Concurrently with the Olympiad, Leipzig organized an exhibition entitled “Chess Through the Ages”.

It was quite a challenge to view all the exhibits sent by 150 museums and many private collectors from all over the world over such a short period of time.

The Soviet exhibition opened with a stand “Lenin and chess”. In the section “Chess is the people’s game”, foreign chess players could find the answer as to why new chess talents keep coming up every year in the land of socialism. The showcase of Soviet chess literature stunned the foreigners with huge print numbers: 30,000, 50,000, 100,000 copies...

In the same showcase, I saw our *Sahs* magazine, both in Russian and Latvian, as well as books published by the Latvian State Publishing House.

Everyone marveled at the chess pieces made by Russian artisan Shushkanov and inspired by the story of Sadko. These fairytale pieces were earlier awarded a Great Gold medal at the Brussels World Fair. The Central Art Workers’ House poster for the David Oistrakh versus Sergei Prokofiev chess match attracted much attention as well.

The average attendance of each round in Leipzig was around 5,000 – it’s a record for chess competitions.

The last round couldn’t change much in the tournament table. The Soviet team had already won, the US team had finished second, and Yugoslavia had taken third place.

We are accustomed to the success of the USSR national chess team, which always wins gold at the

Olympiads. When the event is already won, the days of difficult battles get slowly forgotten. Those who follow the competition only in newspapers may think that the victory of our chess players, who are stronger on average than the foreign masters and grandmasters, was easy, almost a foregone conclusion. But those who witnessed the Olympiad in person know how difficult the decisive games truly were. The results were only settled literally in the last minutes...

The Soviet grandmasters were happy to write a new page in the history book of Soviet sports victories with their Leipzig win.

Mikhail Tal was, without a doubt, the most popular player at the Olympiad (world champions are always the center of attention). In the last round, Tal made sure that there was a sensation – he lost to the English player Johnathan Penrose.

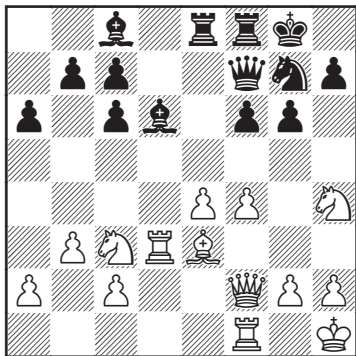
“Now I have enough work for a year,” Penrose said after the game with a smile. “I’ll be going from town to town and showing my game against the world champion!”

Tal’s game against the Hungarian grandmaster Laszlo Szabo was rather interesting.

Szabo, an aggressive, attacking player, got a position to his taste. It seemed that Tal wouldn’t be able to withstand the onslaught of the black pieces. But in the close-quarter street fight, Tal suddenly launched a counter-attack and crushed black’s position.

No. 69

M. Tal – L. Szabo

1960, Leipzig, 14th Olympiad Final,  
round 4

Szabo gets rid of his double pawns and seizes the initiative.

22...b5 23.♙c5 b4 24.♘a4 ♖xe4 25.♙xd6 cxd6 26.♖xd6 ♔e7 (planning to bolster the attack with a pawn sacrifice) 27.♖d2! ♞h5

**Editor's note:** 27...♖e8 posed more problems for his opponent, activating the rook and retaining various options for the knight.

28.g3 ♙h3 29.♞g2 ♖e8 30.♞c5

Tal thought for long on each move, while Szabo played quickly and assuredly: he thought that black's attack would suggest itself. The next move was made by the Hungarian grandmaster without much thought either.

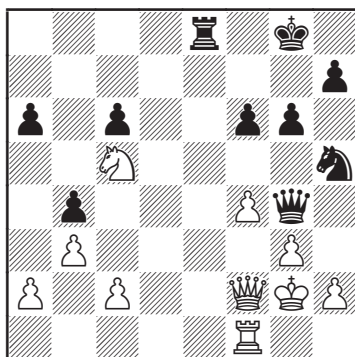
30...♖e2

A mistake. The correct move was 30...♙xg2+ 31.♙xg2 ♖e3, with an equal position.

**Editor's note:** Actually, after the game move the position is equal as well.

31.♖xe2 ♔xe2 32.♙g1 ♙xg2 (white threatened 33.♖e1) 33.♙xg2 ♙g4

**Editor's note:** 33...♙b5! was a much stronger move (on this square, the queen protects both the a6 and c6 pawns and completely nullifies the idea ♙d4-c4+) 34.♙d4 ♞g7=.



34.♙d4!

White goes on the counter-attack. Now it was Szabo's turn to think for a while.

**Editor's note:** 34.♙f3 was probably stronger – on the one hand, white is targeting c6, while on the other hand, he offers to transition to an endgame which will be better for him – black's a- and c-pawns are too weak.

34...a5 35.♖f2 ♙f7

**Editor's note:** This move is a mistake, and black's position is now very hard.

He should have preferred 35...♖f5, improving the queen's position.

36.♘e4 ♔g7

**Editor's note:** 36...♖e7 still gave black some chances to save the game.

37.♖a7+ ♔g8 38.♘d6 ♖f8 39.♖xa5 ♖e6 40.♖xb4 ♖d5+ (a "death-bed" check!) 41.♔g1

Szabo sealed his 41<sup>st</sup> move, but then resigned without resuming the game.

We were sitting in the Astoria hotel restaurant, eating our lunch. Several hours remained until the USSR – Argentina match. Suddenly, the opposing team's leader, Miguel Najdorf, appeared before our table, holding a napkin.

"I'll accept all your sacrifices," he jokingly assured Tal. "You see, I've successfully competed with world champions Capablanca and Alekhine!"

"I'll make a sacrifice for sure. I hope you'll keep your promise," the world champion answered.

In the following game, you shall see if they kept their promises.

### No. 70, Sicilian Defense

M. Tal – M. Najdorf

1960, Leipzig, 14<sup>th</sup> Olympiad Final, round 4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♖f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♙e3 a6 7.f4

**Editor's note:** This move is not popular in modern times. The main line is 7.f3, protecting the e4 pawn and intending ♖d2 and g2-g4.

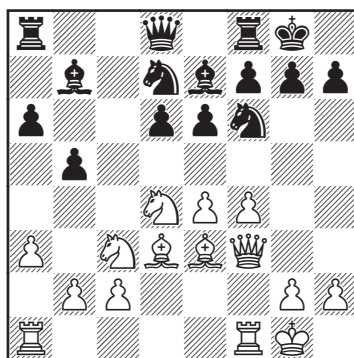
7...b5 8.♖f3 ♙b7 9.♙d3 ♘bd7 10.0-0

**Editor's note:** 10.g4 is usually played in this position.

10...♙e7 11.a3 0-0

Black has a somewhat cramped but solid position in this line. It's not easy for white to overcome his defenses.

**Editor's note:** As a rule, modern strong grandmasters don't castle in this position, instead playing 11...♘c5 (putting pressure on the e4 pawn) or 11...♖c8 (activating the rook, with a positional exchange sacrifice on c3 possible in many lines).



12.♖h3 ♖c7 13.♖ae1 ♘c5 14.♙f2 d5

If black manages to play d6-d5 in the Sicilian, it usually means that all opening difficulties are over. So, after