

## Val Zemitis 1925-2012

by John Donaldson

Chess lost one of its most loyal and hard-working friends with the passing of Valdemars (Val) Zemitis early on the morning of March 22 in Davis, California. The cause was prostate cancer.

Born April 11, 1925, in Riga, Latvia, Mr. Zemitis learned to play in his early teens. He and his sister Rita were taught the game by their father, Martins Zemitis, a master violin maker.

Like many of his countrymen Mr. Zemitis fled west when the Soviet Union invaded Latvia for the second time in 1944. Soon after the Second World War was over he resumed his chess career as a displaced person in Germany while studying at the University of Göttingen. During his stay there he found time to play in one of the first international events after the Second World War (Oldenburg 1946) and to edit the magazine *Sacha Pasaule* (Chess World). This was the first but certainly not the last time Mr. Zemitis involved himself with chess journalism.

While in Germany Mr. Zemitis was taught some of the finer points of the game by Grandmaster Friedrich Sämisch who also sparked his interest in blindfold play. The ten board exhibition Mr. Zemitis gave sans voir in Ottendorf, Germany, on April 22, 1951, is recounted in *Blindfold Chess – History, Psychology, World Records, and Important Games* by Eliot Hearst and John Knoff, the most important book on the subject.

Mr. Zemitis immigrated to the United States in 1951, first settling in Salem, Oregon. While there he managed to climb Mt. Hood while also becoming acquainted with American chess players for the first time. Less than a year later he settled in Berkeley where he studied at the University of California. This was a golden time for chess in Northern California and Mr. Zemitis soon found himself good friends with many of the leading lights of Bay Area Chess including Neil Falconer and Bob Burger. These three would serve as games editors for the newly founded *California Chess Reporter* which was published by Guthrie McClain who was an inspiration to chess players throughout the state and region. All four men were devoted to the Mechanics' Institute Chess Club of San Francisco and the Castle Chess Club, an East Bay institution comprised of UC Berkeley graduates.

During his undergraduate days Mr. Zemitis enjoyed his greatest competitive success, tying for third in the 1954 California Open where he scored 5.5 from 7, drawing with Grandmaster Isaac Kashdan and International Master Herman Steiner. Held in Santa Barbara over Labor Day weekend, the event had all the best players in the state competing and the 81 competitors was a record setting turnout for the time.

Mr. Zemitis was inducted into the US Army in 1956 and was sent to Fort Sam Houston where he was trained to become a radiological technician. Assigned to Germany in part because of his facility with languages (he spoke Latvian, German, English and Russian

fluently), Mr. Zemitis once again found time to resume his chess activities, drawing with soon to be World Champion Mikhail Tal in a simul held around the time of the Munich Olympiad.

It was in Germany that Mr. Zemitis met his future wife Sibylle. The two would be married for over fifty years and had two sons, Martin and Cedrik.

The Zemitis family returned to California in 1959 and the following year, with the assistance of Bob Burger, Mr. Zemitis published his first book, *The Unknown Tal*. This was quite possibly the first book dedicated to the Wizard of Riga.

Family and job commitments kept his chess activities on the backburner in the 1960s and 1970s, but upon retiring from his work with the State of California, Mr. Zemitis returned to the game in a big way as a journalist and promoter. He helped the late Hans Poschman produce the *California Chess Journal* in the late 1980s after the demise of *Chess Voice*, the successor to the *California Chess Reporter*. During this period Mr. Zemitis also became well-known for his role in trying to provide players with information about chess periodicals around the world, producing invaluable comprehensive lists in those pre-Internet days.

Mr. Zemitis did not confine himself solely to chess literature. He was also a man of action who helped the young Zsuzsa Polgar make her West Coast debut in the United States in the 2<sup>nd</sup> San Francisco International in 1986. Later he was instrumental in bringing the Latvian Women's Champion Dana Reizniece to play two international events at the Mechanics' Institute in 2000. Soon after Latvia regained its independence in the early 1990s, Mr. Zemitis found himself corresponding with the young Alexey Shirov and trying to help him find opportunities in a rapidly changing world.

During the last decade of his life Mr. Zemitis continued his productive work, first as the publisher and a contributor to the journal *Latvian Correspondence & Latvian Gambit Magazine* and later for its successor *Latvijas Saha Vestnesis*. As important as these publications were they were dwarfed by the completion of his *Encyclopedia of Latvian Chessplayers*. This massive two volume work, over 800 pages in length, can be found at the Mechanics' Institute and the principal public repositories of chess books – the John G. White Collection in Cleveland, the Royal Dutch Library in The Hague and the Anderson Collection at the State Library of Victoria in Australia. There is no other publication like it devoted to the chess players of one small country; albeit one that has produced giants the likes of Tal, Nimzovitch and Shirov.

A man who seldom, if ever, raised his voice or lost his temper, Val Zemitis will be remembered as a good husband and father, a friend to any animal he ever met and a true lover of chess.

**Zemitis, Val Gottschalk, G. Germany 1951 D13**  
[Annotations by IM John Donaldson]

**1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.cxd5 cxd5 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Bf4 e6 7.e3 Nh5 8.Be5 f5 9.Rc1 Be7 10.Bd3 0-0 11.0-0 Bd7 12.Ne1 Nxe5?! Safer was 12...Nf6. This exchange offers White's knight an excellent post on d4. 13.dxe5 Qe8 14.Nc2 g5?! This is too ambitious. More solid was 14...g6. 15.Nd4 a6 Played to prevent the knight incursion which occurs after 15...Rb8 16.Ncb5. 16.Qb3 Rb8 17.g4! This well-timed blow tears apart Black's position. fxbg4 18.Nxd5! exd5 19.Qxd5+ Kg7? Black's only chance to survive was 19...Kh8 although after 20.Qe4 Qg6 21.Qxg6 hxg6 22.Rc7 Rfd8 23.e6 Bb5 24.Bxb5 Bd6 25.e7 Bxc7 26.exd8Q+ Rxd8 (26...Bxd8 27.Be2) 27.Ne6 Rd6 28.Bc4 the ending is far from pleasant. 20.Rc7 Bc6 No better is 20...Bb5. After 21.Bxb5 axb5 22.Qe4 Rh8 23.Bxb5 Qd8 24.Rd7 Qe8 25.Rc1 Black remains a piece ahead but his position is hopeless. 21.Qe6 Rf7 22.Nf5+ Kf8 23.Bc4 Ng7 24.Qh6 Rxf5 25.Qxh7 1-0**

### **Borocho, Harry Zemitis, Valdemars North-South Match 1961**

[Deep Fritz 12 (10s)] C40: Latvian Gambit

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5 3.Nxe5 Qf6 4.d4 d6 5.Nc4 fxe4 6.Nc3 Qg6 7.Bf4 Nf6 8.h3 [ 8.Qd2 Be7 9.0-0-0 0-0 10.Kb1 a6 11.Be2 b5 12.Ne3 c6 13.Bg3 d5 14.h4 Be6 15.h5 Qf7 16.f4 Bd6 17.Bh2 Qc7 18.Rdf1 Nfd7 19.Bg4 Bxg4 20.Nxg4 Nb6 21.f5 Bxh2 22.Rxh2 N8d7 Sigurjonsson, G (2480)-Gundersen, H (2260)/Graz 1972/MCD/1-0 (31)] 8...Be7 9.d5N [ 9.Ne3 0-0 ( 9...Nbd7 ) 10.Bc4+ Kh8 11.Qe2 c6 12.a4 d5 13.Bb3 Nh5 14.Bh2 Bh4 15.Rf1 b6 16.0-0-0 Ba6 17.Qg4 Qxg4 18.Nxg4 Bxf1 19.Rxf1 Nd7 20.Bd6 Rfe8 21.Ne3 Re6 22.Bh2 Rf8 23.g3 Bg5 Bertrand, E (2025)-Jossien, R (2189)/La Fere 2003/EXT 2004/0-1 (32)] 9...0-0 10.Qd2 Bd7 11.Ne3 [ 11.0-0-0 a5 ] 11...Na6 [ 11...Nh5 12.Bh2 Bh4 ] 12.0-0-0= Nc5 13.Kb1 b5 [ 13...Nh5 14.Bh2 Bg5= ] 14.Bxb5 Rab8 15.Bxd7 [ 15.Bc6± ] 15...Nfxd7= 16.Bg3 Bf6 17.b3 Rb4 [ 17...a5 18.Ng4 Be7= ] 18.Rde1 [ 18.h4 is an interesting idea Qh5 19.Ne2= ] 18...Rfb8 19.Ned1? [ 19.h4 a5 20.h5 Qf7 ] 19...e3? risking all for a chance to play a brilliant move [ 19...a5 20.Re3 a4 21.Ne2 axb3 22.cxb3+ ] 20.Rxe3? [ 20.Qxe3 Nb6 21.Kc1 ] wrong choice, validating Black's gamble 20...Rxb3+!!-+ a huge payoff for success 21.axb3 Nxb3 22.Qd3 preparing to return some material to blunt Black's pressure Nbc5+ 23.Qb5 Rxb5+ 24.Nxb5 Ne4 [ 24...Nb6 25.Nxc7 Nc4+ ] 25.Nxc7 [ 25.Rhe1 Ndc5 26.Nxc7 ] 25...Nxg3 [ 25...Bg5 26.f4 Bf6 ] 26.fxg3= Objectively, the game is equal, but it doesn't feel that way. Ne5 27.Nb2 Qf7 28.Nb5? and this mistake puts Black on top again [ 28.Ne6 would keep White in the game Qb7 29.Rb3 Qxd5 30.Nf4 ] 28...Qxd5-+ 29.Rb3 Qc6 [ 29...Qxg2 is more precise 30.Rd1 d5-+ ] 30.Rd1 d5 [ 30...Qxg2 31.Nxd6 Nc6 32.Nd3 Qxh3 33.Ne4 ] 31.Nd4 Qa6 32.Rb8+ [ 32.Nd3 Nc4 33.Nc1 Qc8 ] 32...Kf7 33.Nb3? another dubious decision [ 33.Rb3 ] 33...Nc4 [ 33...Nd7 would finish him off 34.Rb4 Qa3+ ] 34.Nxc4 dxc4 [ 34...Qxc4 35.Rb7+ Kg6 36.Rd3 ] 35.Nd4? [ 35.Rd7+ Kg6 36.Nd4-+ ] 35...Qa3 36.Rb7+ [ 36.Rb5 hardly improves anything Qc3 37.Rf5 Qb4+ 38.Kc1 Qa3+ 39.Kd2 Qxg3-+ ] 36...Kg6 37.g4 [ 37.h4 otherwise it's curtains at once Qc3 38.Rd7 Qxg3 39.Rd5 Qxh4 40.Nf3-+ ] 37...Qc3 38 Resigns [ 37...Qc3 38.Rxa7 Bxd4 39.Rxd4 Qxd4 40.Ra6+ Kg5-+ ] 0-1**

**Zemitis,Val Gross,Henry San Francisco 1963 D41**

[Annotations by IM John Donaldson]

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 c5 5.cxd5 Nxd5 6.e4 Nxc3 7.bxc3 Nc6? 7...cxd4**  
8.cxd4 Nc6 is the normal way to handle the position. Now Black quickly gets the worst  
of it. **8.d5 exd5** As 8...Nb8 is met by 9.Bb5+ Bd7 10.dxe6 Bxb5 11.exf7+. **9.exd5 Nb8**  
**10.Bb5+ Bd7 11.0-0!** Pragmatic and strong was 11.Bxd7+ Qxd7 12.0-0 but Val prefers  
an old-fashioned king hunt. **Bxb5 12.Re1+ Be7 13.d6 Nc6 14.Bg5 f6 15.Qd5 Qd7**  
**16.Qxc5 Ba4 17.dxe7 fxc5 18.Qxg5 Rg8 19.Qh4 Bc2 20.Rac1 Qf5 21.Nd4 Nxd4**  
**22.Qxd4 Qd3 23.Rxc2 Qxc2 24.Qd5 Rh8 25.Qxb7 1-0**

**Zemitis,Val Marshall,Dan Correspondence 2003 C52**

[Annotations by IM John Donaldson]

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.b4 Bxb4 5.c3 Ba5 6.d4 exd4 7.0-0 Nge7 8.Ng5 d5**  
8...Ne5 9.Nxf7 Nxf7 10.Bxf7+ Kxf7 11.Qh5+ g6 12.Qxa5 is considered to be slightly  
better for White in Nunn's Chess Openings (NCO). **9.exd5 Ne5** 9...f6!? is an old  
recommendation by Levenfish. **10.Qxd4 N7g6** NCO says that Black is better, but Mr.  
Marshall wasn't able to deal with White's most natural reply. **11.Re1 0-0? 12.Rxe5 Nxe5**  
**13.Qxe5 Re8 14.Qf4 Re1+ 15.Bf1 Qxd5 16.Bd2 Rd1 17.Qa4 Rxf1+ 18.Kxf1 Bf5**  
**19.Qd4 Bd3+ 20.Kg1 Qf5 21.Na3 Bb6 22.Qf4 Qc5 23.Qxf7+ 1-0**

