

Georg Mohr and Adrian Mikhalchishin

FORGOTTEN GENIUS

The Life and Games of Grandmaster Albin Planinc



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**The Life and Games of
Grandmaster Albin Planinc**

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CIP - Catalog record of the publication
National and University Library, Ljubljana

794.1(497.4):929Planinc A.
929Planinc A.

MOHR, Georg, 1965-

Forgotten Genius : The Life and Games of Grandmaster Albin Planinc / Georg Mohr and Adrian Mikhalchishin ; [fotografije New in chess ... et al.]. - Maribor : Šahohlačnik, 2020

ISBN 978-961-91322-6-5
1. Mikhalchishin, Adrian
COBISS.SI-ID 24921347

Table of Contents

For the hero of my youth	9
Childhood	13
1961 – First tournaments	17
1962 – First Steps on the State Scene	23
Planinc : Cvetković	28
Grosek : Planinc	30
1963 – Maturation	33
1964 – Breakthrough at home	39
1965 – Planinc introduces himself	41
Planinc : Djurović	42
Bogdanović : Planinc.....	46
Planinc : Matulović	51
Planinc : Ostojić	56
Grigorian : Planinc	61
Planinc : Grigorian	65
Lukin : Planinc	69
Incident and punishment	73
1967-1968 – Why do you not return?	75
Planinc : Jelen	76
Planinc: Gligorić	78
Planinc : Cvetković	84
1969 – Explosion!	87
Planinc : Marangunić	88
Planinc : Matanović	91
Ostojić : Planinc	98
1st Memorial Dr. Milan Vidmar	103
Planinc : Matanović	107
Barcza : Planinc	109
Unzicker : Planinc	113
Planinc : Musil.....	116
Planinc : Gheorghiu	120
Planinc : Lutikov	124
Planinc : Puc	127
1970 – The journey begins	131
Ungureanu : Planinc	132
Tringov : Planinc	134

Planinc : Gašić	138
Browne : Planinc	141
Planinc : Kovacs	143
Planinc : Vukić	145
Planinc : Podgayets	149
Planinc : Andersson	151
Shamkovich : Planinc	155
Planinc : Gerenski	162
Szilagyi : Planinc	165
1971 – A New Grandmaster!	167
Jelen : Planinc	168
Mecking : Planinc	169
Planinc : Najdorf	174
Sumiacher : Planinc	177
Poch : Planinc	180
Planinc : Spiridonov	182
Ljubojevic : Planinc	185
Skopje 1971	191
Planinc: Tringov	192
Damjanović : Planinc	194
Gufeld : Planinc	200
Planinc : Velimirovic	204
1972 – The fight for an Olympic ticket	207
Kurajica : Planinc	209
Planinc : Lengyel	214
Velimirović : Planinc	216
Barcza : Planinc	217
Planinc: Kovačević	223
1973 – The Dutch fairy tale	225
Donner : Planinc	227
Planinc : Najdorf	231
Planinc : Balashov	234
Planinc : Ribli	237
Smejkal : Planinc	243
Puc : Planinc	251
Amsterdam 1973 – The world at his feet	253
Donner : Planinc	254
Marović : Planinc	258
Planinc : Andersson	263
Langeweg : Planinc	265
Planinc : Timman	272
Ribli : Planinc	275
Enklaar : Planinc	282

1974 – The final ascent	289
Planinc : Timman	290
Planinc : Enklaar	293
Planinc : Quinteros.....	296
Planinc : Lombardy.....	302
Ree : Planinc	305
Planinc: Timman	307
Hastings 1974/75 - The road to immortality	311
Planinc : Beliavsky.....	313
Vaganian : Planinc.....	317
Planinc : Garcia Gonzales.....	321
1975 – An additional dimension to life	327
Barle : Planinc	330
Matanovic : Planinc	333
Minić : Planinc5	335
Planinc : Portisch	339
Planinc : Vukić.....	345
Planinc : R. Byrne.....	348
1976-1979 – There is no life without tournaments	353
Tarjan : Planinc.....	354
Planinc : Knežević	356
Planinc : Kirov	363
Planinc : Sigurjonsson.....	366
Planinc : Raičević	371
Planinc : V. Kovačević	375
Planinc : Nemet	378
Planinc : Spasov.....	383
Planinc : Pokojowczyk	385
1980-1985 – Agony	389
1985-2008 – Darkness	393
Epilogue	397
About authors	401
Bibliography.....	405



For the hero of my youth

I have been actively involved in the chess world for several decades. I have dealt with practically everything that has to do with the Royal Game: from playing professionally, training at home and all over the world, organizing tournaments, even the biggest of events, to writing columns, comments, articles and books. I am lucky that I was born in one of the most chess-loving countries in the world, Yugoslavia, and that my Slovenia has continued the shining chess tradition outlined by the old Slovenian genius Dr. Milan Vidmar. I have traveled the world with chess. And wherever I introduce myself and wherever I have tried to explain where my little country was, I was greeted with a smile. Chess? Slovenia? Of course - **Albin Planinc!**

Right. Albin Planinc. Not Dr. Vidmar, unofficially the fourth best chess player in the world at his time. Not Vasja Pirc, the only Slovene with 'his' opening. Nor Bruno Parma, who keeps six Olympic medals in his cupboard. But Albin Planinc, an artist who went down in chess history with 'one move more'. More precisely, with many more moves. He created a whole series of moves that will go down in the annals of chess forever.

I always had only one role model in chess, Albin Planinc. I knew about his difficulties, that he was one of the chosen unfortunates - chess geniuses who were pushed aside, forgotten. Among those who crossed the thin line between genius and madness, that invisible line that absorbed many chess geniuses on the other side, not only Planinc. They were Paul Morphy, the first role model of Planinc himself, Wilhelm Steinitz, the first World Champion, Akiba Rubinstein, perhaps the greatest of all those who did not crown themselves with the title of World Champion. In a way also Robert Fischer, if you like. And many others, maybe just a little less famous, less important.

Who knows what history would be like if Albin Planinc had existed for a few more years? His actual career only lasted a good five years, and in that short time he left us an incredible amount. He ran out of time to fight for prestigious titles, he ran out of time to explain some secrets of some forgotten openings. There are games. The readers of this book will soon discover that these games are not commonplace. They are imbued with incredible energy, interwoven with so many imaginary climaxes, with so much of what most people think is beautiful in chess. These are games destined for chess immortality, the games of the Slovenian chess Mozart.

Everything else is a coincidence. Including the fact that Planinc was one of my first teachers, who were not abundant in the mid-seventies of the twentieth century. Until our paths crossed again, a few years later, when I had the honor of playing one of the last games in the life of a great master. Until a good twenty years later, when I was allowed to announce the death of my role model to the world. How painful it was for me when I remembered all the unfulfilled wishes to help him somehow, to make his final years easier.



Albin Planinc

How many evenings we dedicated to Planinc and his creativity with my chess friend, co-author of this book, Grandmaster Adrian Mikhalchishin, who comes from a completely different chess environment. And who, interestingly enough, has also learned from the games of the great Albin Planinc! And he certainly did not lack examples in the old Soviet Union. But no, Adrian recognized and chose Planinc!

So the decision to write a book about our hero was not too difficult. We saw it as our duty. Adrian is only too well aware that great stories are often forgotten.

I sincerely hope that you, dear readers, will enjoy the wonderful masterpieces you find in this book. In addition to the authors, some contemporaries of Planinc were also involved in the writing, immediately responding proudly and lovingly to the request to keep the memory of the Slovene genius alive. I sincerely hope that the book you have before you will ensure that we will not forget the Slovenian self-taught chess player, one of the greatest chess players the world has ever known.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have participated in the project. First of all Adrian Mikhalchishin, who has invested a lot of his knowledge, goodwill and energy in the project. Grandmasters who have written their own memories of Planinc, and you will find these in special 'boxes' in this book. To the con-

temporaries, friends, and fellow competitors of Planinc who remembered this or that anecdote, this or that event, this memory. To the young contemporary of Planinc - friend, sparring partner, student and teacher at the same time - Iztok Jelen, who wrote a special article about their young years for this book. Janko Bohak, the legendary chess player from Ptuj, a fanatical collector of everything related to chess, for providing us with the material he had so carefully collected about Planinc.

Special thanks go to Rajka Smokvina, the lady who was the only one to win the heart of Planinc and who so selflessly shared with us her memories and confided to us many secrets from the life of a genius from Ljubljana.

Books about chess players usually do not find sponsors who are also willing to financially support the publication of the book. The story of Planinc is an exception here as well: the former president of the Slovenian Chess Association, **Dr. Tomaž Subotič**, came to our aid immediately, and **Evgenij Ušakov**, a Russian-Latvian-English-Slovenian businessman, who is considered one of the greatest supporters of chess projects in modern times, became even more involved in the project. The Slovenian Chess Federation also accepted the invitation, in addition to its current president, **Dr. Milan Brglez**.

Almost last but not least, thanks to the team of employees (their names can be found in the colophon) who have devoted too many hours of their free time to the project. And finally, although perhaps they should be at the top, the members of my family who so patiently endured my escape to Planinc World. They probably trembled not to interfere too much with the fate of my role model.

Georg Mohr, Chess Grandmaster,
Maribor, December 2020



Childhood

Albin Planinc was born in the middle of the Second World War, on 18th April 1944, in the little village of **Briše**, near the small town of **Zagorje ob Savi**, approximately 30 kilometers from Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. He spent his childhood with his mother **Ljudmila** (unofficially Milka), a simple, uneducated woman who earned money from various unskilled jobs.

They lived together with their grandmother, who was still alive at the time, or rather served on a large farm, which the locals call Pr ,Bratet. The Razpotniks have lived there for many years, and the current owner, **Franc Razpotnik**, remembers the Planinc family as follows:

‘I was still too young to remember Albin and his mother, who moved to Ljubljana a few years after the war. Grandma stayed, and we arranged an apartment for them above the barns. They earned housing and food with help on the farm, such were the times then. It was said that the Planinc ladies came to us from France. I don’t know how or why, but I assume that the lady was married to one of the miners, and quite a few of them left our places for bread abroad. Anyway, they came back alone, and later Milka had a son.’

The name of the father was not known - it was spoken, although it was never officially confirmed, that the father was a (unknown) German soldier. This interpretation would explain a lot, especially the existential problems that Ljudmila suffered in the first years after the war. The strict Socialist-Bolshevik authorities in former Yugoslavia did not like such stories – Albin and his mother were never rescued by the welfare from poverty.

Moreover, Ljudmila was also in a very bad state of health. The fragile woman was exhausted at work and later at home so that she could barely lead a decent life. Soon (or even earlier?) the first signs of persecution mania appeared, a mental illness that was rarely encountered at that time, and an effective treatment could not even have been spoken about.

The mother took care of every task, whether it was at home in Briše, where she helped on the farms, or with occasional services, such as cleaning at the Ljubljana railway station. Albin attended primary school in neighbouring Mlinše, and he did not like school. Mostly because of classmates who knew his hardships, and those difficult moments that he and his mother endured, and because the classmates also knew about the psychological crises from which the mother

occasionally suffered. Albin was always hungry, often ridiculed and did not feel comfortable in such an environment.

The mother had no one she could turn to for help. When her mental distress was particularly great, she was kept at Ljubljana Hospital for one day, two days, and sometimes longer. During these days Albin stayed at home alone. Frightened, hungry and helpless. If he even peeked out of the apartment, he was greeted by his neighbors who called him 'rough, hard words'. Mostly words that the little boy did not even understand, but he knew they did not mean anything nice, nothing good. The wounds were carved into his already so delicate consciousness, which balanced on a very thin wire till his death.

Albin was shaped by his childhood, and if you add the genetics and the situation in which he and his mother lived, we get an adolescent boy who was promised nothing particularly beautiful in his life. The bond between him and his mother became stronger every day. They had each other and slowly built a cage, a kind of armor plating that remained unbreakable until the end. Neither he nor the mother could step out of the cage. Albin tried several times, but the bond to his mother was always the stronger, calling him back to the world that only they knew.

As chance would have it, a teacher named **Janez Železnik** showed the children in the primary school in Mlinše how to play chess, and taught them the rules of the game. Of course, no one ever dreamed that inside a small, self-contained little boy was hiding a chess dynamite. Not even if it was considered good in that environment, not even if it was great, they would not recognize it there and then. But it was Albin's game, and he remembered her rules.

Another coincidence was that once, when his mother had just got back from the hospital (while Albin spent the usual humiliation at home) she bought a chess set as a present for him. Was it a casual gift? Maybe a birthday or some holiday gift, where the common people were given presents at that time. She probably knew his interest in the game, so she did not buy him a ball. She had no money for a bicycle, but as for the ball ... well, who would play ball with her 'Bine' anyway, a little boy who did not even take part in street games?

The next few years of Planinc's youth are shrouded in darkness. Later Albin found out that his only toys, the chess set, held on to him with all their might. He was the happiest boy under the sun when he found a fellow player, anyone, just to play a game. At school he asked his classmates, but they had no place for the black and white squares and for moving wooden pieces. Where they lived there was no time for such things.

Just like the one-year older Bobby Fischer on the other side of the Atlantic, he also acquired his chess knowledge himself. At that time he did not know that

there were chess books in the world. Although not far away lived a 'huge' chess player, once one of the best in the world, Dr. Milan Vidmar, this meant nothing to Planinc. He and his mother did not follow the news, even less read the newspapers in which some chess news, or even a diagram, were published from time to time. They lived in their own world, hidden far away from the life that circled around them.

Soon the story in Briše closed: the mother could no longer manage to survive in the small town, and they set off for Ljubljana. There Ljudmila found a modest job and they moved to a kind of barrack's apartment, which gave the poor people at least the basic conditions for survival.

At the end of the fifties, when Albin was entering his teens, they found themselves in the Slovenian capital. Life was hard, and they continued to live in fear of poverty and constant shortages. It had become easier for the boy to spend the days when his mother was in rehab, but apart from that not much had changed. The young man was 'swallowing' books, which he found more easily in Ljubljana, at least easier than in Briše, which was becoming more and more a place at the end of the world. He was interested in everything, but he did not change his relationship with school. He finished basic school education, but for a continuation of studies he had no desire, no interest. The game of chess occupied him all the more, attacking both his conscious and subconscious. Chess became his mirror to the world; he compared everything in his way to the pathways on the chessboard.

Once he trusted to his young acquaintance, **Vinko Velušček**, one of the few towards whom he kept his positive attitude all the way to death: 'You know, Vinko, I understand this sentence of Pythagoras. But in chess this rule does not apply - no matter how you turn it around, the calculation according to chess moves and the hypotenuse does not work ...'

He became ever more alone, locking himself up in the company of books and a mother, who was all the time without words. The mother was a kind, gentle woman who saw her own fears. She also transferred her anxiety to Albin, and both felt most secure in the protection of their modest home. Mother, with her thoughts who knows where, and Albin, with his books, which he read one after another, day and night, even in semi-darkness, which also worsened his vision in the long run.

During these years, Albin found out that chess is not just a game to shorten leisure time. Among his many books there was more and more often a chess book, which opened a new world to him, a world which he did not suspect. By this time he had already filled thirteen years, so we can find information in many

of his records that he properly learned the game at that age. The great masters, tournaments, stories of old times were attracted to him like a magnet. Openings, endings, strategies and, above all, tactics! He was a restless spirit, and felt more attracted to this element than with the peaceful, safe, predictable. Probably it was right there, in those early years, that he had developed a style of play that would later so excite the chess public. At first locally, soon expanding through Slovenia, then throughout Yugoslavia and within a few years all over the world ...

Since his first chess lessons he had been fascinated by the magical inauguration of King's Gambit. How enthusiastically he studied the romantic games of old masters, who were able to invent such unusual, such superior ideas and won games in great style - not only with a 'naked' technical game. And Jose Raul Capablanca? He would fall asleep at his games! Therefore it was Paul Morphy who became the hero of his youth. Albin knew all his games and also his tragic personal history. And he fully understood them, and he experienced compassionately and deeply the American's moments of loneliness and confusion, the fact that he is not in his right time and space.

Even among the Slovenian chess players Albin had his hero. Stojan Puc, Golden Olympian in 1950, a strong master, later International Master and many years later also a Grandmaster (FIDE recognized his title many years later, on the basis of the Olympic Gold medal) Stojan Puc, the chess player who embodied the Planinc perception of the game. The King's Gambit was a permanent fixture in the repertoire of Puc, as were unusual defensive systems with the black pieces. Puc was always looking for action, counterattacks and opportunities. The famous Albin Planinc would soon follow in his footsteps.

1961 – First tournaments

Planinc's tournament beginnings resemble the few years younger **Iztok Jelen** (born 1947), an International Master from Ljubljana. He did not know yet that a strange bond would develop between them, and their careers would be intertwined, practically all the way to Planinc's retirement from chess. Sometimes their bond was stronger, definitely the strongest in the early years, later the most fleeting, as they moved along their respective paths, Jelen in academic chess, Planinc in top chess.

'I met Bine, as we colleagues call him, in January 1961 at the **Ljubljana Youth Championships**. It was a few days before my fourteenth birthday and about three months before his seventeenth. We played in a very spacious chess house, which was located in the city center, on Cankarjeva street 1, on the first floor. For me, it was probably my first serious tournament outside the school or club framework, as we both started to play more seriously relatively late, he in his thirteenth year, me in my twelfth.

His beautiful victories in the first rounds of the championship were already in the foreground of the team mates' attention before our game. I surprised him with a version of the Sicilian Defense that I knew from the magazine *Šahovski glasnik*. And after we drew in just a few moves, we simply sat down for a long analysis. I cannot remember who was more afraid of continuing the fight and who offered the draw. But I do know that after the Bled super-tournament of the same year, when the chief arbiter Dr. Milan Vidmar started to pursue premature draws, it would not be possible to finish the game so quickly, without receiving a yellow card from the arbiter ...!'

Planinc took third place in the Championship (the champion being Marjan Ankerst, who later became a Master), and two months later we again fought, at the **Ljubljana Youth Championships**, for the next qualification step. Planinc had the white pieces and I already knew that he used the King's Gambit, so I prepared the so called Opatija Abbey Defense, which was recommended by Vladimir Vuković in one of his very popular books (*Škola kombiniranja*).

After...

1.e4 e5 2. f4 ef4 3. Nf3 d5 4. ed5 Nf6 5. Bb5 c6 6. dc6 Nc6 7. d4 Bd6 8. o-o o-o

He surprised me with a move

9.c4

... which was new to me.

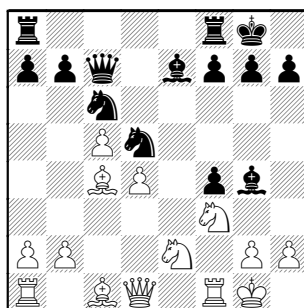
9...Bg4 10.Nc3 Qc7

These moves were followed, surprisingly again, by the move ...

11.c5

... which I had provoked with my previous move. Since it abandons the square d5, I believed it violated the rules of positional play too much to expect.

11...Be7 12.Ne2 Nd5 13.Bc4



13...Ne3?!

As we can convince ourselves of today with computer analysis, here 13...Rad8 would be better, with advantage to Black.

14.Be3 fe3

I do not remember the rest of the game, I just know that the balance did not collapse and we agreed to a draw in about ten further moves. Neither he, nor I, were happy with the opening outcome. Because 13...Rad8 did not come to my mind, I had the impression that I was not quite equal in the opening, but that he did not gain any advantage either. So, after this game I no longer used the Opatija defence and after a short time, Planinc prevented it with the risky Steinitz variation **3.Nc3 Qh4 4.Ke2**, with which he had quite some success.

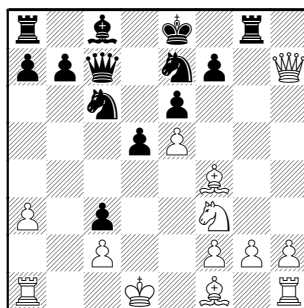
Apparently this was the tournament where I also witnessed an interesting event, when Planinc completely outplayed one of his opponents, who thus stopped the clock in a seemingly hopeless position. In analysis Planinc showed him a hidden defence that would have made resignation unnecessary. The opponent was suddenly revived and asked Planinc if they could continue the game, which was finished already! Planinc said yes (!), they restarted the clock and continued the game as the arbiter hadn't noticed that the game was already over. His opponent fought back for a while, but the final score did not change - Albin won the game with a nice combination.

Another adventure, of a similar kind, happened a few months later, in June, at the **Youth Championships of Slovenia**. The competition was held in two parts: first the qualification, then the final tournament. The first part was very stressful because we had to play two games per day. After a long and exhausting fight in the morning, which itself I could hardly manage, we met in the afternoon. I had the white pieces. Under the impression of the recently-ended duel between Mikhail Botvinnik and Mikhail Tal, I chose a fashionable variation, which was used by Tal against the Winawer Variation in the French Defence:

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 Bc3 6.bc3 Ne7 7.Qg4 Qc7 8.Qg7 Rg8 9.Qh7 cd4 10.Kd1!?

Even this extravagant move is from the Tal : Botvinnik match. Today we know that better is 10.Ne2.

10...Nbc6 11.Nf3 dc3 12.Bf4?!



After this inaccurate move, Black can take over the initiative with the answer 12... Qb6! I only counted on the standard 12...Bd7, but Planinc upset me with ...

12...Rg4?!

This move made me answer with the unaesthetic 13.g3, after which I was no longer satisfied with my position, even though it would actually still be good. Even better than 13.g3 would have been 13.Bg5.

However, I said to Planinc: 'I'll surprise you; I give up.' And I stopped the clock. I told him that I was sick and unable to continue the game. He protested. It is characterized by a slightly more rounded posture for worship, but he leaned back and began to flip through his trouser pockets. Out of it he pulled a stick of chewing gum and said: 'Here, take it. It will strengthen you and you can go on.'

I thanked him, but I stuck to my decision. As a result, he easily took his place in the final tournament, where he was inspired with ideas and combinations, but too often the difficult sights appeared in his games. For example, in a game with Lipnik, when he won the bishop pair and a pawn for his opponent's rook after an

excellent attacking game, he had to exchange queens and transpose into a completely winning endgame. But, he messed up everything and finally even lost. I should know, as I (with the permission of the arbiter) copied all the games of the final tournament and then studied all of Planinc's (and the other best games from this Championship) from these notes. When I asked Albin about this game, he said that it was extremely difficult for him, when, in a thrilling match, where the opponent was completely outplayed, to prove a victory in the endgame, when the opponent ought to have given up ten moves ago ...'

International master **Vojko Musil** (born 1945) from Maribor, his keen opponent in the youth competition, also remembers Planinc's first official competitions.

'We met in 1961 at the Slovenian Youth Championship in Ljubljana, where we came from Maribor with **Ivan Žagar**. Although we were a year or two younger than Planinc, we were much more experienced and seasoned warriors in chess. We grew up in the middle of the then-stellar Railway Chess Club Maribor (*Železničarski šahovski klub Maribor*), which also achieved wonderful success at full Yugoslav level, and we played very successfully on the youth boards. Albin introduced himself to us as early as 1961 as a loner. He didn't hang out too much or do almost anything with the other participants. When the naughty teenagers hurried into the night after the games, Albin was not with us.



Slovenian Youth Championship, Ljubljana 1961. Planinc standing, fourth from left.

During the championship we stayed in a student dormitory and - interestingly - Planinc also lived there. Although we were told that he was from Ljubljana, he allegedly lived in the student dormitory during the school year. So his room was in the other wing of the house and after the games he hurried there, but did not return to us. So we remembered him mostly from his games. They were wonderful, something new and refreshing on the Slovenian chess scene. Fireworks of ideas and wonderful ideas were just gushing out of him. We knew he only needed experience ...'

In 1961 chess was at the height of its popularity in Slovenia. The Interzonal Tournament in Portorož in 1958 and the two rounds of the Candidates' Tournament, which were held the following year in Bled, were still remembered by the public and chess players alike. Slovenia was proud of its legendary Grandmasters Dr. Milan Vidmar and Vasja Pirc, proud of the Golden Olympians from the Dubrovnik Olympiad in 1950 (Stojan Puc and Milan Vidmar Jr. (son of the famous doctor) plus Pirc, of course). Both the Vidmar elders and Pirc were also known as excellent chess theorists and writers, and their teachings were nurtured by the new genus of extremely talented chessplayers. In the first row Bruno Parma, who became World Youth Champion in the same year 1961 and announced his entry among the great stars of world chess (later he would win six Olympic medals with the then-superpower Yugoslavia, although his potential was not fulfilled in the end).

Chess life took place mainly in two important centers - Ljubljana and Maribor. In the capital, the drivers were the forces of the Slovenian Chess Federation, while the chess players were gathered in a legendary chess home in the city center. In Maribor the pace was dictated by the Railway Chess Club, which won the National Chess Cup in 1959. In 1961 there was also the legendary tournament, something like a memorial of the first big tournament in Bled (1931), when the World Champion Alexander Alekhine raced away and scored a victory with one of the biggest gaps in a super-tournament in chess history (his nearest rival, Efim Bogoljubov, a full five and a half points behind!)

Even stronger was the jubilee tournament – involving numerous past and future World Champions and some Slovenians.

The young Slovenian guard did not yet play at this tournament (except Parma, of course), although this new genre of chess players showed incredible talent. Albin Planinc, Vojko Musil, Mirko Žagar, Iztok Jelen and many others, were a team such as no other republic in Yugoslavia could boast. And not only in Yugoslavia, in the whole world, too.

1962 – First Steps on the State Scene

Let's hand over the story once again to **Iztok Jelen**:

‘In this and the next two years there were frequent periods when Planinc and I met regularly in the late afternoon and evening at the Chess House for joint chess analyzes, friendly games and discussions for two. In the kiosk at the corner of Cankarjeva cesta we regularly bought the *Zagreb Vjesnik on Wednesday*, where the occasional National team player, the International Master **Mario Bertok**, published the games of current and important tournaments. Afterwards, we analyzed together the opening and the central themes of the most interesting games. Often until 11 pm when the director closed the house. The topics of our conversations were not always just chess. Sometimes we also read something else from *Vjesnik*. Even though Albin was well self-educated with an open mind, I did not have the feeling that I lagged behind him. But what he read, unlike me, who was inclined to believe the authorities, he thought analytically about and with a healthy dose of skepticism. I would say he was a self-made thinker, but I myself was more of a ‘bookworm.’

Once he asked me, seriously as usual, how it is possible for an Asian man, unlike us Westerners, to endure sexual intercourse with a woman for up to five minutes without an orgasm. Because I did not know if it was a little or a lot, and because I did not have that kind of experience, I kept quiet, gently. However, he developed the idea that this is possible through meditation, yoga and other mental techniques that are in the tradition of their cultures. Then we went back to chess topics. He asked me again, ‘Would you try drugs if you had the chance?’ ‘No!’ I fired this one syllable as if from a cannon and out of conviction. He disagreed with me. He said, ‘I would try drugs if I had the chance. I’d be interested to see how they work.’

I once asked him why he insists on playing the King's Gambit, although it is obvious that the Ruy Lopez objectively leaves more room for initiative. He replied that the game in the ‘Spanish opening’ develops too slowly for his taste; it needs too many preparatory moves, too many maneuvers before the action takes place. Suggestions as to what to analyze, what to talk about, he usually gave. He was interested in my implementations, answers and opinions, with which he then argued and argued analytically. Persistent but calm, with a serious expression on his face, on which I could detect a slight hint of bitterness. The seriousness

was tempered by rare flashes of humor about a paradox, which brought a smile to his face. Sometimes, when he was annoyed by some irregularity or injustice, he would get excited in conversation. After more determined gestures and mild hints of sarcasm or causticity in his words, it was clear that he did not care.

‘At the **Ljubljana Youth Championships** in January 1962, Albin took first place, with myself second. We drew our game. He beat me at the **Junior Championships in Slovenia** in July. Supposedly this was the tournament where I played a kind of Blackmar-Diemer Gambit: **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Bg5 c6 4.e4?! de4 5.f3 ef3 6.Nf3 Bf5**. He then defended himself without difficulty and converted the pawn advantage. He won the tournament and qualified for the **Yugoslav Youth Championships** where he tied for fourth and fifth places.

‘In September of the same year, we both played in the **Slovenian Championship** for the first time. Already during the tournament we were invited to visit the library by the then secretary of the Slovenian Chess Federation, the well-known journalist **Aco Pasternjak**, who for this period and then for almost a year afterwards was our most important and principal supporter within the chess organization. The chess player from Maribor, Dr. Ivan Krulc, had left many important chess books and literature to the Chess Federation in his will, so we could select the books we needed for our development. After the first half of the Championship, Aco invited us to join the Chess Club Novinar, which needed us the following year to play in the first divisions of both Yugoslav and Slovenian leagues.’

Dr. Ivan Malešič, one of the leading Slovenian chess players in those years, also remembers interesting events from the Slovenian Championship: ‘It was an extremely tense Championship. As the only representative of Styrian clubs among the ‘Ljubljana mafia’, as we called the group of extremely strong Ljubljana masters in Maribor, I tried to get to one of the first two places that led to the national Championship. I knew that the people of Ljubljana would ‘play as a team’ and try to disable me, but I nevertheless fought well and a few rounds before the end I still held the ticket to the national Championship in my hands. But at the same time I struggled with a technical problem: because the Maribor team was going on a long, pre-arranged tour to Scandinavia, where they were waiting for us with the best railway clubs they possessed, I announced before the tournament that I would have to play the last game in advance. Not the arbiters, much less myself, knew what I would do if I adjourned one of the last games: the adjourned games were scheduled for the day when I was supposed to be driving towards Stockholm.

It turned out that I might only adjourn one game, against debutant Albin Planinc, then an 18-year-old, silent, humble boy. After wild complications, the game unfolded into an even, equal finale, which would have ended in a draw in just a few moves. How the Ljubljana cats jumped! They skied around Planinc, begging him not stop the game, because I would not be able to continue anyway. But the tall boy only looked up at them a little, sat down at the chessboard and said, 'I suggest a draw. I know about your problems, but there is a draw on the chessboard. I'm not interested in plots, just the position on the chessboard!' What a character! I didn't meet Albin too much in later times. My path took me to science, he completely surrendered to chess. But in me he had made a big fan for life, as well as an older comrade who could always ask him for advice on this and that.'

The **National Youth Championship** in 1962 was Planinc's first major success at national level - an important achievement in the country, which at the time was undoubtedly the second chess superpower in the world. As a Slovenian champion, Planinc expected even more than a tie for fourth place, as well as more than his middle of the table place in his first important tournament among seniors - the **12th Slovenian Championship**. All the more so because he was already



National Youth Championship, Vrnjačka Banja 1962. Planinc standing, second from left.

completely blinded by chess. Playing in the Black and White fields was by far the most important thing in his life: school was a long-ago memory, and he convinced his mother that he would just like to play chess for a few years. He was eighteen years old, and although today it doesn't seem like excessive youth, Planinc lacked experience. After all, in 1962 he played his first serious and official games against seniors, and he had barely three or four tournaments behind him!

For his chess approach he did not need much: he was modest to the extreme, he ate little or almost nothing, although he was a big, strong boy. Even then his taste for food began to take shape; he did not like meat and ate it only on rare occasions. Alcohol did not smell good to him either, and he still had a negative attitude towards smoking at that time. As we can read in Jelen's memoirs, he was interested in girls, but probably more in theory than in practice. There is nothing known about Planinc having a girlfriend, or even a crush. Chess and chess alone!

Musil also remembers the 1962 Youth Championships:

'In 1962, Planinc waved the regulations at the Slovenian Youth Championship at us all. Along with him, Žagar and I also qualified for the **National Youth Championship** in **Vrnjačka Banja**, and a good two weeks of intense socializing awaited us, when we finally got to know Albin a little better, and not just around the chessboard. I remember his complete naivety the most. He trusted everything and everyone, and it was obvious that he had a lot of problems with interpersonal relationships. Of course, young people at that time did not yet know or perhaps want to understand this, and we took advantage of this quite a few times. Especially Žagar, who could not understand that Planinc did not understand a single word of the Serbo-Croatian language, and in Vrnjačka Banja in 1962 he could not help himself. Since he was constantly annoying us with what to order for dinner, Žagar once recommended that he order 'mastilo' (ink in Serbo-Croatian) for a drink at dinner. Albin, of course, obeyed him, but after receiving the order, the waiter wanted to physically settle accounts with him ...

For the second time, Planinc listened to him when ordering lunch: 'Today only 'šargarepa' (carrots in Serbo-Croatian), please!' How amazed he was when he was served a large bowl of sliced carrots ... And so it went in a circle. The good-natured Planinc did not blame us for our pranks, moreover, he soon completely relaxed and before the end of the tournament he had already made some jokes. These were wonderful times, and the foundations of our friendship for many decades was laid.

It was different at the chessboard. We Slovenes were a force, all three among the hot favorites for first place. In the end, none of us succeeded, but all three of us finished in the top five. Žagar was second, Planinc and I fourth and fifth.

Slobodan Bojković took the victory sensationally in front of our noses, and Bojan Kurajica, a few years later also the World Youth champion and later still a famous Grandmaster, split the Slovenian trio. With this result, we paved the way for the youth national team. A few months later, we were called up for a traditional duel with our Hungarian peers, this time Budapest's turn to play host. Our socializing continued; the friendship strengthened.'

And in the game only initiative, attack, risk. Time was an element he valued far more than material, and although he could not put it into words, this could be deduced from his way of playing chess. With the White pieces, he loved the move 1.e2-e4, with which he could fight for the initiative in the most justified way. He had his favorite variations: in the open games the King's Gambit, against the French Defense 3.Nc3, against the Sicilians the main variations. With the Black pieces he liked to defend himself with the French Defense, as he enjoyed most and wanted closed openings. The King's Indian layouts and especially the Benoni were painted on his skin. He analyzed them passionately, understood many variations in his own way and served up a new idea, new move or a completely new plan in practically every single game. In addition to all these theoretical ideas, Planinc's chess game was characterized by something else: constantly looking for a way to win. He was unfamiliar with the draw in practice, and eventually began to despise it more and more. The parallels to Robert Fischer draw themselves, only that the way of Planinc was even more complicated, even more difficult. However, there was one important difference between him and Fischer. While the American was content with victories - the easier it was, the more he liked it - Planinc himself was never satisfied with victory itself. It needed an accessory, an aesthetic input, preferably one that would turn chess games into works of art.

Game No. 1

Planinc : Cvetković

Youth Championship of Yugoslavia 1962

(Notes by Georg Mohr)

Srdjan Cvetković (born 1946) was two years younger than Planinc and his long-time rival, clashing in numerous competitions. In his best years, he distinguished himself by his excellent positional style, he was considered a great theoretician and, above all, a very difficult chess player to beat.

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cd4 4.Nd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Bg5

This move, and the variations associated with it, have been worshipped by Planinc since his chess beginnings. His imagination had a clear path in these, then unexplored areas, and Planinc himself opened many new chapters, which were used by attackers for many years after.

6...e6 7.f4 Be7 8.Qf3 h6

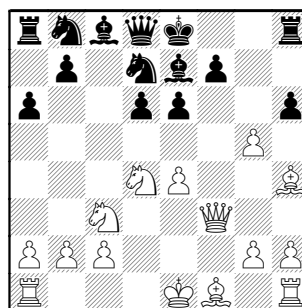
Later, Black stopped playing this way and switched to systems with a speedy ...Qc7, ...Nbd7, ...b5, etc. But in the early 1960s, the ...h6 and quick ...g7-g5 plan was very popular, and White players had long been looking for ways to gain an advantage.

9.Bh4 g5!?

The famous variation with which the Argentine Grandmaster trio (Miguel Najdorf, Oscar Panno and Herman Pilnik) surprised the Soviet Grandmaster favourites (Paul Keres,

Efim Geller and Boris Spassky) on the same day at the Gothenburg Interzonal Tournament 1955 and created one of the most famous stories in the history of the Sicilian Defense. The Soviets, although all were shocked, pulled themselves together and outplayed the unfortunate Argentines one by one. But the variation survived nevertheless. The Soviets won games then simply because they were better chess players. The variation was also used by the young Bobby Fischer, who shocked Svetozar Gligorić with it at the Interzonal tournament in Portorož 1958, and paved the way for the Candidate's and the Grandmaster title, with a sensational, attractive draw!

10.fg5 Nfd7



11.Bg3

In the games mentioned above, the main theoretical controversy a few

years later had been about the sacrifice 11.Ne6, and later still White also attempted 11.Qh5. At that time Planinc did not want to enter the opening debate against a 'great theoretician' and preferred to turn instead to his own initiative.

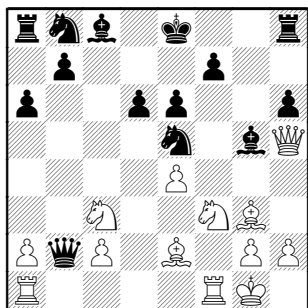
11...Ne5 12.Qh5 Bg5 13.Be2

13.Nf3 looks more logical, forcing Black to take on f3, as the g5-bishop is also attacked. After 13...Nf3 14.Qf3 Nc6 15.h4 followed by 16.o-o-o, White is better.

13...Qb6

A dramatic moment! Black attacks everything with active play and hopes for 14.Nb3, when after 14...Nc6 15.Bf2 he would save himself with the spectacular 15...Bd2!? We don't know if Planinc saw the above variation, but he certainly had something completely different in mind:

14.Nf3!? Qb2 15.o-o!



Game No. 2

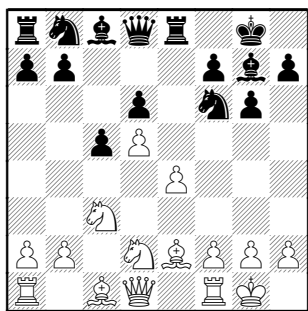
Grosek : Planinc

XII. Slovenian Championship 1962

(Notes by Georg Mohr)

Branko Grosek (1934-2006) was also a tough, hard-to-beat master, a real challenge for an ambitious young man, who at that time did not respect »authority« at the chessboard too much. And it was another opportunity for the Benoni, an opening which was not very well-respected at that time and which was chosen with the black pieces by 'savages', such as Mikhail Tal in the Soviet Union, and here Albin Planinc ...

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e6 4.Nc3 ed5 5.cd5 g6 6.e4 d6 7.Be2 Bg7 8.Nf3 o-o 9.o-o Re8 10.Nd2

**10...Na6**

This is how Tal played, this is how the young Hungarian Lajos Portisch played, and the development of the knight to a6 was also Planinc's favorite choice. The second, main variation is the development of the b8-knight via d7, with the idea of jumping to e5 or

c5. With the development of the knight to a6, Black flirts with a possible bump ...b7-b5 (after ...Na6-c7), but if White stops Black's plans with a2-a4, the black knight can also anchor itself on b4. On the other hand, it is true that the active knight on the queenside does not take part in the fight for the center, where White usually directs their forces.

11.Re1 Nc7 12.Bf1 Qe7

12...Rb8 works better in principle and if 13.a4 then 13...a6 (Or even better 13...b6 and only then ...a7-a6 and ...b6-b5.) Why 13...b6 first? To prevent White's blockage of the queenside with a4-a5.

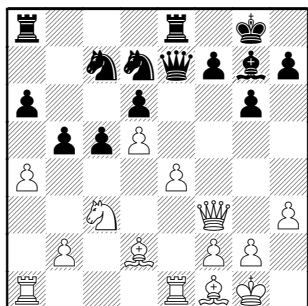
13.Nf3!?

The white knight wouldn't survive on c4 (13.Nc4 b5 14.Na5 c4 when Black would be in great shape.) So, he politely admits the 'mistake' and returns to the side he was on just a few moves ago.

13...Bg4

The loss of time allows Black to get rid of the white knight, who is bothering him in establishing communication between the pieces. The plan of ...Bg4 and ...Bf3 is another standard tool in the Benoni, when the bishop pair usually shows its strength only in the endgame (if the endgame occurs at all).

14. Bd2 Nd7 15. h3 Bf3 16. Qf3 a6 17. a4 b5!

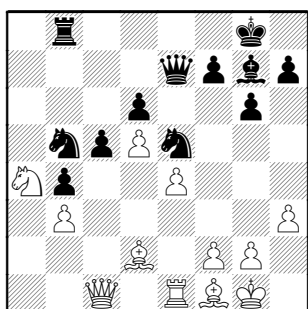


After the scheduled exchanges on the queenside, the game will calm down and Black will enjoy at least an equal position.

18. ab5 ab5 19. Ra8 Ra8 20. b3

After 20. Nb5 Nb5 21. Bb5 Bb2 the game would be equal. The white bishop pair does not count, as the light squares are weak, with no objects of attack, and Black easily organizes his counterplay via the dark squares in the center (d4 and e5).

20...Ne5 21. Qd1 Rb8 22. Qc1 b4 23. Na4 Nb5



Interestingly, even the computer (which in principle does not like the Benoni too much) already gives an ad-

vantage to Black. No wonder Grosek, who started looking for a solution to the blockade on the white squares, also started to feel uncomfortable:

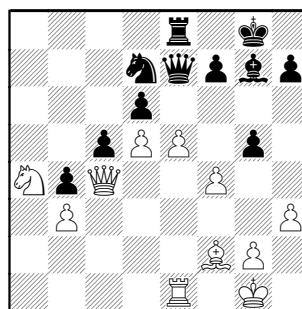
24. f4 Nd7 25. Bb5 Rb5 26. Qc4

All well and good, but White doesn't have a smart plan for the long run.

26...Rb8 27. Be3 Re8 28. Bf2 g5!?

Typical Planinc already in 1962! Black could easily keep his balance by maneuvering calmly and possibly playing ...f7-f6, thus preventing the e4-e5 shock, the only potentially active option for White. A young man, against an experienced master! But something like that would never have occurred to Planinc. He wanted to win - no matter the risk and no matter the name of the opponent on the other side of the table!

29. e5!



The correct reaction; the game opens up and comes to life in an instant, which is supposed to go hand in hand with White's bishop pair.

29...de5 30. fg5 e4 31. Be3?

Unnecessary procrastination. After 31. Nc5 Nc5 32. Bc5 Qg5 33. Bb4 White would have a healthy pawn more.

31...Qe5 32.Rf1

On 32.Nc5, Black has 32...Nb6!

32...Qg3 33.Bf4 Bd4?

But why this intermediate check that again offers White a transition to the endgame with an extra pawn? It is very likely that time was running out - both Planinc and Grosek were known as 'great thinkers'. After 33...Qd3, Black would stand better.

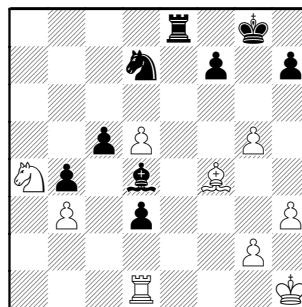
34.Kh1?

Returning the favor. Correct would be 34.Qd4 Qf4 35.Nc5 etc.

34...Qd3!

Finally!

35.Qd3 ed3 36.Rd1



36...c4!

The introduction to a long, forced, winning variation!

37.bc4 Ra8 38.Rd3 Ra4 39.Rd4 b3

40.Rd1 b2 o:1.

1963 – Maturation

Once again, let's leave the words to a young friend, competitor and at the same time Planinc's student, **Iztok Jelen**:

'In January 1963, Albin and I competed in the **tournament of twelve young First Category players in Maribor**. At the Zamorc Hotel, where we played, he surprised me with his handicraft skills in the room we shared. With both hands at the same time, he threw various toiletries into the air in the bathroom and juggled them without any of them falling to the floor. When we went to the movies for the evening show at 8pm, he vouched for me and convinced the strict ticket seller that I was already 16 years old. According to the rules of the time, young people were not allowed to attend evening performances. Due to his distinctly recognizable attacking and combinative abilities, it was announced that Planinc, along with Musil, had the best chance of winning the tournament. In the end, he fell behind not only Musil, but also Fajfar and me. I only vaguely remember the first moves in our game, in which he was Black:

1.d4 d6 2.Nf3 Bg4 3.e4

He didn't play his best in the sequel and I beat him. This crushed him considerably, as the defeat marked the end of his hopes of winning the title of Candidate Master. In the Geller Gambit of the Slav:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 dc4 5.e4 b5

... he also lost against Robert Ceglar, who successfully defended against his attacks and then asserted the advantage of the captured gambit pawn.

In the winter, we also competed at the championship of our club, which was held in the new premises of the Association of Journalists on Vošnjakova Street. Against me - for the first and last time - he didn't start with 1.e4. I defended myself with Grünfeld's Indian Defense and after:

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Qb3 dc4 6.Qc4 o-o 7.e4

chose Flohr's sequel

7...c6

... which was at that time analyzed and recommended in the Russian professional journal, *Chess Bulletin*. Planinc failed to develop an initiative and soon came to terms with a draw.

In the unusually hot last days of April and the first days of May 1963, young Peter Fajfar, Boris Paš, Albin Planinc, Janko Saradjen, Peter Torkar and I played a qualifying tournament for a free place at the international tournament in Rogaška Slatina, which was planned for autumn. In the foreground was Planinc, who played some nice games, especially his victory against Fajfar, who defended with the classic Scheveningen variation in the Sicilian Defense. The victory was so convincing that after the game his opponent stated that from now on in this variation he will never again place the queen's knight on the c6 square, which is otherwise standard for him.

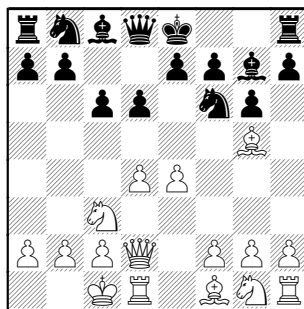
Episode from this period:

'Somewhere in Styria, the team of Novinar was returning to Ljubljana from a match in the Slovenian first league. We were in a DKW car, which was above standard for our situation at the time and was driven by the former Slovenian chess champion, later head of the TRIGA nuclear reactor, engineer Zdravko Gabrovšek. In the back seats, Planinc and I 'blindly' analyzed Bogoljubov's Indian Defense. After 3...Bb4 Albin defended by 4. Nbd2, while I defended Black's side. He followed the variations easily, though I struggled. He asked me a few questions that I couldn't answer well because my ability to analyze without sight of the board was too weak. That's why we stopped our analysis and started asking Gabrovšek details about the car.'

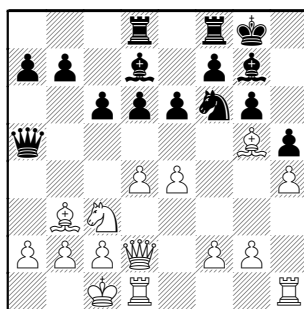
But the most beautiful game of the tournament was Saradjen's win against Planinc, in which, as Black in the main Dragon variation of the Sicilian Defense, he successively sacrificed a piece and the exchange for an indefensible attack. However, Planinc's reputation in the 'combination game' was already so great at the time that we took his defeat in it more as an exception that confirms the rule. The qualifiers, which were led by Planinc despite the above-mentioned defeat, were apparently not even played to the end, at least I don't remember that we faced each other. Shortly after the start of the competition, we learned that the international tournament in Rogaška Slatina had been cancelled. A few weeks later, we played for the first time in Bled for the team of Novinar in the first Yugoslav league, which was then held (for the last time) on eight men's and two women's boards for each team. We won third place. Immediately afterwards, we had an event for the four-member team 'Novinar young' in the highest non-Cup group, which took place in the Bled Festival Hall. The competition took place as part of a mass chess event, the central point of which was the final tournament of the Yugoslav Cup. Planinc played on top board, followed by Fajfar, then me, and Ceglar on fourth.'

After a long search for the best weapon against Pirc Defense, Planinc settled down for a short period in 1963 with the continuation:

1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Bg5 Bg7 5.Qd2 c6 6.o-o-o



He achieved with it, if memory serves, some nice victories. In a game from which only a few fragments remain in my memory, he soon played the move **Qd2-e1!**, which I especially remembered due to its paradoxicality and efficiency, and later used it several times. Although the move itself loses two developmental tempos, as it moves an already-developed piece back to the first rank, it creates threats that led to many of Planinc's victories. The fact that Qd2-e1 can really be a good move in the above-mentioned 'Planinc's' setup can also be seen from the artificially composed position shown in the following diagram.



An artificially composed position that illustrates the power of Planinc's idea Qd2-e1. It's White to move, and he can maintain the advantage in several ways, but the most effective is the move **1.Qe1!**, which threatens the advance of the e-pawn, while creating a 'battery' with three pieces; Qe1, Nc3 and Qa5. With the queen still on d2, tactics based on Nc3-d5 do not work, because Black would exchange the queens on d2 with check. In the case of a queen on e1 however, in addition to the move 2.e5, after which Black would lose the exchange, White also

threatens 2.Bf6 Bf6 3.Nd5 Qe1 4.Nf6 Kg7 5.Nh5 and White would end up with an extra pawn. Not even 1...Rde8 helps, which otherwise defends both of these threats and protects Black from immediate material losses, but puts him in a completely subordinate position after 2.e5 Nh7 3.Be3. Plans related to the paradoxical withdrawal of the queen were later used by White in many openings, and in many places this move gave White an advantage. So it was with Planinc, who used the plan in his most important game so far, defeating Florin Gheorghiu, winning the tournament and stepping into the chess high society.

Later in 1963, in doubt about my further chess career, I decided not to play chess anymore. I did not want to reconcile the uncertain career of a professional chess player with the desired later peaceful family life. The profession of chess coach, which later enabled me to work professionally in the field of chess, was completely unknown at the time. Only the notion of a chess second, that is, an assistant to a competitor during a tournament, was known, but it was not a profession. Planinc, who dropped out of school due to poor financial conditions or chess, had no choice at all, as chess was by far the highest among his priorities. Over time, when my decision became 'final,' I filled a large travel bag with my best books and placed it in front of Planinc at the Chess House, saying: 'I don't need this anymore, but it will help you.' All unhappy, he looked at me and murmured: 'What am I supposed to do with all this?' I was stunned speechless. He, too, was silent. He had no habit of convincing people. He let them decide for themselves and take responsibility for their actions, much like they have to on the chessboard. Finally, he just picked up the travel bag and said goodbye. After this event, we met for dinner at the Rio restaurant in Ljubljana, at the break-up of our club. Already at the invitation to dinner, the *spiritus movens* of the club Franček Brglez (a member of the league team which was then, with Grandmaster Bruno Parma at the helm, one of the best in Yugoslavia) told us that due to the changed method of financing provided by the state there was money neither for a place in the first federal league, nor for further quality performance. The rest is enough for a joint farewell dinner.'

Planinc had two more important performances that year. At the **XIII. Slovenian Championship** he tried to correct the previous year's impression, but he only partially succeeded (he took 9th place, two places better than the year before). He later attended the qualifiers for the **XIV. Championship of Yugoslavia**, which were held in Pula, though without much success, finishing in 12th – 14th places.

Either way, it's not too hard to figure out that the 19-year-old had found himself at a turning point. His youth years were slowly coming to an end and hard fights awaited him. He had not yet proved himself; it's true that he drew attention to himself in many games, especially with his combinatorial, offensive style of play. But many more times he 'broke down' along these paths.

The call-up for military service therefore came for him, in a way, as ordered. He would have enough time to think about how to proceed, to 'air' his previous knowledge and findings, to plan what and how to proceed. He knew that he would still be left to himself, which he was used to anyway. He cared a little about his mother, who would be left without his company and help for a long time, but he believed she would somehow be able to cope. In any event, her Bine would return - even stronger, and more determined that he would succeed.

1964 – Breakthrough at home

In 1964, Planinc captured a single tournament – the **XIV. Slovenian Championship**. This Championship was very important for him (and also for other Slovenian chess players), as it opened the way to the national (Yugoslav) Championship and from there to even higher levels of chess. Planinc did not know what to expect from the Championship; his previous two performances, although he had high expectations both times, completely failed him, and though this time an average ranking could be interpreted as due to lack of play, yet another year would be lost.

Then there was a sensation, the wonderful surprise he had prepared: he played wonderfully, achieved an excellent **second place** among the sixteen participants and smoothly won a ticket to the national Championships, for which the first three qualified. Only master **Marjan Ankerst**, who was the champion two years previously, was again more successful. Planinc, who won nine times in fifteen games, was half a point behind. What cost him his first title was three defeats, two completely unnecessary, when he did not want to put up with a draw. Stojan Puc was one and a half points behind in third place. The basic goal, qualifying for next year's national Championship, had been achieved. How much easier it would be to train from now on! With even greater zeal he threw himself into chess, into the study of unusual openings, into the search for unknown, as yet unexplored paths in positions on the transition from the opening to the middlegame, into which Planinc breathed dynamics like a magic wand placing them on a chess map.

After Jelen's (temporary) withdrawal from chess, Planinc was even more lonely - he had lost his 'sparring' partner, a colleague who took him with all due seriousness and respected him. He was left alone again; his mother just couldn't help him with chess. Their cage was getting narrower, and the bonds between them were getting stronger, more and more unbreakable. And yet Planinc still could not wait for the following year. He might not have rejoiced so much if he had guessed what misery was destined for him.

