

Chess and the Game of Life: Jānis Ezeriņš’ Novelette *A Game of Chess*

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Abstract The paper is aimed at analysing the novelette *Šaha partija* [A Game of Chess] (1923) written by the pioneer of Latvian modern short story and translator Jānis Ezeriņš in the context of Latvian chess history and Latvian literature. By stepping out of the ordinary world around us, any play structures its spatial and temporal boundaries to eventually transform into a game. Games, specifically brain games, being both logical and creative situational activities, not only turn chaos into a systematic order, but by organizing reality they also map humans’ intelligence and unleash their instincts. While striving to reveal the great significance of apparently insignificant occurrences in human life, Ezeriņš reflects on the grotesque and absurd by delving into playful shifts and play-elements to depict both the plot twists and interchange of tragic and comic colouring, as well as the fusion of the binary oppositions the “past—present,” “good—evil,” “alive—dead.”

Keywords short fiction; novelette; irony; modernism; game¹

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¹ The research article is an expanded and revised version of the author’s essay “« Si vous ne pouvez tuer mon roi de bois... »: les échecs et le jeu de la vie dans *Partie d’échecs* de Jānis Ezeriņš” published in the book in French *Noir sur blanc, Jeu d’échecs et littérature en Europe médiane*. Ed. Andras Kányádi. Editions des Syrtes, 2023, 56-70. ISBN 9782940701698

Introduction: Chess and Latvia

Pilsēta—šahs
Visstiprākā figūra—
torņi.
 (Ojārs Vācietis)

[A city—chess
 The most powerful piece—
 rooks.]¹

On the map of the world, the place of Latvia and Riga as a chess metropolis is marked through several symbolic signs and testimonies in both the city cartography, sculpture and architecture, as well as in cinematography and literature. In one of the most famous city parks — the Vērmāne garden, which has been a popular meeting place for chess amateurs in the 1950–1980s —, there stands a monument² to the eighth World Olympic (1960) champion Mikhail Tal (1936–1992), known internationally as a “chess magician” from Riga (Kehris et al. 111-112).³ Tal was born in Riga on the threshold of one of the most important chess events in the history of independent Latvia, and in Europe of that time, i.e. Ķemeri (Latvia) international tournament I (1937), thereby symbolically connecting two different cultural periods through time. Other city culture signs, too, — a street named after the international grand-master and “Tal Residence”, luxury apartments that by their decorative elements emphasize nuances of the chess game — are not only the tributes to the great chess-player of his era, but also a historical and cultural footprint of chess on modern-day Latvia. In addition, various screen versions (e.g. the documentary film *Mihails Tāls. Pēc divdesmit gadiem* [Michail Tal Twenty Years Later] (1980) shot in Riga film studio, *Mikhail Tal. From a Far* (2017) and others⁴), as well as stagings (e.g. the Latvian National opera *Mihails un Mihails*

1 Here and henceforth the translation from Latvian is mine—I. K.

2 An informative plaque on the bronze monument states: “To the world chess champion of 1960–1961 from the grateful citizens of Riga, Haimis Kogans, Viktors Krasovickis. Sculptor Oleg Skarainis. August 10, 2001.” [translation from Latvian] (Spārītis).

3 See: Tal.

4 E.g., the sports drama film *Grossmeyster* [RUS] [Grandmaster] (1972) by Sergey Mikaelyan (USSR).

spēlē šahu [Michail and Michail Play Chess]¹ (2014)) have been the attempts to reveal the psychological portrait of a holder of many titles and legendary chess player and explain the mysterious popularity of chess in Latvia in general, as well as to show its significance for the formation of Latvian cultural identity in particular.

According to archaeological studies, two chess pieces (a horse and a pawn, made in traditions of Eastern symbolism) were found on the territory of present-day Latvia in diggings of an ancient fisherman's homestead, and they date back to at least the thirteenth century (Caune "Arheoloģiskie pētījumi Rīgā ..." 111; Caune "Viduslaiku šaha figūru atradumi Latvijas PSR teritorijā")². Chess pieces from the German period were found in German castles in other parts of the territory as well (Zeile; Zanders); by the seventeenth century, chess had already become common in many families throughout several generations.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, some Latvian literary and cultural editions of that time, for instance, a monthly *Austrums*, and periodicals published in the German language, have had a chess column, which testifies to the involvement of certain circles of Latvian society into chess life, inspired among others also by the members and supporters of first chess organizations established in Riga in the 1870–1880s, such as the chess group at the trade association (*Rigaer Gewerbeverein*) and a chess section at the Riga Latvian Society. The Latvian Chess Society was founded relatively late, in 1890, thanks to the efforts of teacher and journalist Andrejs Ašarins (1843–1896), a representative of the Baltic German minority (Bērziņš et al. "Kultūra" 332).³ In 1898, Riga Chess Society II was established, but was forced to stop its activity in 1915 under conditions of WWI until 1920 (Bētiņš et al.).⁴

After the declaration of Latvia's independence (1918), the year 1924 has been seen as a turning point in Latvia's chess life: during the first Latvian chess congress, the Latvian Chess Union was founded, and Hermanis Matisons (1894–1932) gained the victory and the title of the first master in Latvia. This paved his way to the Olympic games in Paris (1924) where he became the winner of the golden award and title of Olympic master at the chess individual tournament (Koblencs; Bētiņš et al.; Bērziņš et al. "Sports" 822). To enhance the understanding of the game of

1 Producer Viesturs Meikšāns; composer Kristaps Pētersons; in 2015, the opera received Grand Music Award—the highest prize awarded by the Latvian state in the field of music.

2 Wood turned chess pieces found on the territory of modern-day Riga testify to the fact that at the beginning of the thirteenth century chess had widely spread among the townspeople (Caune "Arheoloģiskie pētījumi Rīgā ..." 88, 91, 120).

3 The number of chess circles grew in many cities countrywide.

4 Since 1936, it was known as the United Riga Chess Society.

chess in Latvia, textbooks and didactic journals of the art of chess were intensively published in the 1920–1930s¹; columns in popular Latvian newspapers and journals of that time were devoted to the history and strategies of chess and informed about the recent achievements in it as well (Bētiņš et al.). A significant accomplishment was a decision of Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE) to publish a chess card titled “Latvian gambit” (1934) (devoted to one of the most outstanding Latvian chess players—Kārlis Bētiņš (1867–1943)), which became very popular among Latvian chess enthusiasts, including in the national chess groups formed in exile (especially in the 1940s–1990s (*Trimdas latviešu...*)).

All the events mentioned above promoted the rise of chess in popularity and contributed to the regular organization of chess tournaments on a national and international level, as well as chess-players’ participation in various international competitions overseas.² However, passion for chess spread beyond the field of familial, local, national and international sports competitions and became an integral part of culture and literature which highlighted their iconic figures in gaining victories over their fictional characters or themselves, or in depicting a sequence of events in a story as if actions on a chess board. One of them is the master of Latvian short prose and “individualized speech” (Vilsons 652), the author of the novelette *Šaha partija* [A Game of Chess]³ (1923)⁴—Jānis Ezeriņš.

Jānis Ezeriņš

*Mēs mūža šaham tik daudz uguns dodam,
Kaut labi zinām—neizbēgams mats.*
(Imants Auziņš)

[We give so much fire to the life-long chess

1 E.g. Eklons; Koblencs, etc.

2 As a member of the World Chess Union (from 1928), Latvia regularly participated in FIDE Olympic Games until 1940.

3 After the restoration of Latvia’s independence (1991), the literature of a small and young nation became gradually more accessible to West-European cultures through the translations into English, German, French and other languages. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jānis Ezeriņš’ prose works were translated into French (e.g. Ezeriņš “Le singe”). *Šaha partija* was translated into French in 2008 and 2022 (Ezeriņš *L’âne rose*; Ezeriņš “Partie d’échecs” (a revised version of 2008)). The novelette has also been translated into English and known as *A Game of Chess* (Ezeriņš). Further on in the text it will be referred to by its English title.

4 In 1923, the novelette was published in the literary and art journal *Ritums* and in a collection of novelettes *Leijerkaste*.

Though well we know—unavoidable is mate.]

In 1924, when Latvia declared itself as the state of chess and its first great victories were celebrated on the national and international level, the young Latvian writer Jānis Ezeriņš (1891–1924), suffering from a severe illness, passed away at the age of 33. Ezeriņš — the recipient of the Latvian Culture Fund Award (1923) for the collection of novelettes *Leijerkaste* [Street-Organ] (1923–1925) — is the greatest Latvian short prose writer of the 1920s who has best of all represented himself in the genre of anecdotal novelette. The writer's portfolio includes also collections of stories and novelettes *Dziesminiņš un velns* [The Bard and the Devil] (1920), *Fantastiska novele un citas* [Fantastic Novelette and Others] (1923), *Apstarotā galva* [Enlightened Head] (1923), and other prose works, as well as a collection of poems *Krāšņatas* [Gorgeous] (1925) and translations of works by classics (e.g. Old French legend *Aucassin and Nicolette*, Giovanni Boccaccio's short stories, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Charles Baudelaire's poetry etc.), whom he has drawn inspiration from. He has also been known as the head of the literature department (1919–1922) of the newspaper *Brīvā Zeme* [The Free Land] (Smilktīņa "Laikmeta konturējums").

The period of maturity in Ezeriņš creative search and his contribution to Latvian literary heritage, though not very great in number but valuable, concur with a dramatic period in Latvia's history, namely, WWI and coping with the disastrous effects of this war, struggle for Latvia's independence, proclamation of Latvia's state and Latvia's Independence War (1918–1920). Along with the attempts to enforce the self-determination rights of the nation, during the period of social and political transformations, the struggle for changes in public opinion and the Europeanization of Latvian literature and culture was continued. Being open to West-European literary trends, the representatives of younger generation writers of the 1920s, tended towards the unity of innovative form and content and in their creative manifestations adhered to the principle of the value of human, the value of art itself, its uniqueness and otherness. Ezeriņš' conflicting world perception, philosophical approach to life, social and cultural experience, as well as individual features (openness, sincerity, carelessness, vitality, sociability, impulsivity, explosivity, romanticism and others) greatly contributed to the intertwining of the comic and the tragic, the regular and the paradoxical, the logical and the absurd in both his literary works and portrayals of their characters, which can be attributed to a very definite and rather independent and mature interpretation of art's mission (Ērmanis; Mauriņa; Vecgrāvis; Berelis). In his literary works, the short-prose virtuoso, Ezeriņš,

nicknamed “the God’s imp”¹ and “choleric Bohemian writer”, handled the problems of human’s “delicate ailments” through nontypical content and form, by including domestic scenes into a fast plot, via unexpected turns and amelioration of strange situations thereby revealing “fine neurosis” of the emerging modern era:

We can be really glad about him [Ezeriņš] where with a mathematical precision and real imagination he constructs quite expressive cases as if describing experiments in a human’s life. (Sūna)

Since his first creative attempts in literature, he has always been “a searcher for his own original expression, his own world” (Veselis 35-36), whose stylistic manner of writing was improving and adapting itself for the depiction of points of human’s anxious soul and sudden psychic change.

Ezeriņš lived in the era when play elements and game-playing as initially “alien” impulses gradually became customized into “one’s own” literary pattern. It was the era of the chess “epidemic”: chess was widely played in cultural institutions and cafes, and it was written about in periodicals and depicted in literature (Grigulis 126). In Andris Akmentiņš’ (b. 1969) novel *Meklējot Ezeriņu* [Searching for Ezeriņš] (2021)² — a comprehensive and detailed first-person narrative about Ezeriņš’ life and literary heritage from the perspective of the past and the present — chess has been sketched as an integral part of both the writer’s life and culture space of the beginning of the twentieth century, e.g. chess as an element of a rural space (Taube Church tavern) alongside live music, newspapers and presence of representatives from the field of art makes this space too “correct”, “light” and “delicate”, which, as depicted in the novel, does not comply with the young Ezeriņš’ mood and is perceived as too formal (Akmentiņš 53). On the contrary, the game of chess, becoming the attribute of Ezeriņš’ rented space, i.e. of an informal space shared with a friend, is outlined as a short-time symbol of freedom, bohemianism and comradeship.

1 The designation was borrowed from the title of Ezeriņš’ poem *Dieviņa velniņš* by Zenta Mauriņa in 1926.

2 The book was published within the series *Es esmu...* [I am...] developed in the framework of the project on the interaction between Latvian prose and literary theory (2020–2024), implemented with the support of the State Culture Capital Foundation and by the initiative of writer and art historian Gundega Repše (b.1960), aimed at re-evaluating personalities of 13 Latvian writers and their contribution to the development of Latvian literature.

Chess and Latvian Literature: Brief Overview

Varbūt saspēlēsim šahu?

Saspēlēsim.

Padomā pats—vai tev policistos nav neviena ienaidnieka?

Nav, nav man neviena ienaidnieka.

Nu, ko tu runā kā tāds bērns! Pieaugušam cilvēkam ienaidnieks vienmēr atgadāsies.

(Alberts Bels)

[Perhaps we can play chess?

All right, let's do it.

Think a little—don't you have a single enemy among the policemen?

No, I have no enemy.

Now, you talk like a child! An adult always manages to have an enemy.]

Games and game-playing have been a leitmotif of creative expression in literature for centuries. Various writers around the world have relied on depictions of intensive mentally-stimulating brain games to reveal the politics of diplomacy and processes of formation of individual and collective identities by uncovering inequalities by class, status, gender, and sexuality. Although brain games in general and chess as a board game, in particular, are traditionally associated with power play — the state of being at “war” and attempts to succeed in a struggle against odds or difficulties through a mental effort, i.e. by the means of strategic and logical thinking and clarity of the end goal —, they are also reflections of personality, character, and, eventually, of reciprocal social and emotional interactions.

Under the conditions of the heightened ideologization of art under Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1944/45–1990), persons showing interest in the phenomena of Western art focusing on expressions of freedom in art were subjected to repressions and censure in Latvia; likewise, any manifestations of individualism in literature, as well as works by those Latvian writers who did not submit to the propaganda and supported trends of decadence, avant-gardism and modernism were also banned (Kacane).

Chess remained popular among intellectuals in Soviet Latvia life for decades, however, underwent some transformation, both, in their daily lives and literature:

From the community of Latvian writers, chess has disappeared quite a long

time ago. Still after the war [WW II], chess was played from morning till night in all editorial offices. The editorial office of *Literatūra un Māksla* [Literature and Art] was a real “chess club”, therefore this newspaper often published pithy articles. At all writers’ gatherings chess was played “in every corner” [...] Since the sixth writers’ congress, in Writers’ Association chess is no longer played. (Grigulis 125-126)

In Latvian Soviet literature, created on the basis of socialist realism as a didactic program supported by the state, chess was most frequently integrated into literary texts as a metaphor of the struggle between two conflicting sides within the frame of two moral conceptions (“good—evil”). In the USSR of the 1960–1970s, popularity of chess contributed to its perception in the context of a collision between “justice” and “illegitimacy” and class contradictions, which in this struggle manifest themselves as an eventual victory of the so-called “good”/ “the just”, i.e. victory of the structures of the Soviet power and their representatives. Chess as a strategic detective game and an intellectual tool for analysing and understanding the opponent’s psychological motives and intentions, for anticipating and revealing opponent’s positions and actions within the framework of a binary opposition “crime investigator/ forensic medicine expert” (representative of the structure) vs. “a (potential) criminal/ murderer/ accomplice” (metaphorical figures on the chessboard) can be seen in Latvian Soviet detective literature, e.g. in the detective novel *Šahs briljantu karalienei* [Checkmate to the Queen of Diamonds] (1971), which through the moral idea of a classical detective about the triumph of the “good” and punishment of the “evil” enhances the perception about the strength of the “just” power:

Kā pēc spraižas šaha partijas izmeklētājs klusībā analizēs apsūdzētā gājienus, viņa rakstura īpašības, vājās puses. Un zinās, uz ko balstīties un plānot turpmāko izmeklēšanu” (Steiga and Vofs).

[The investigator will secretly analyse moves of the accused, features of his character, and weak sides as if after an intense game of chess. And [he] will know what to base on and plan further investigation.]

Contrary to the Soviet era, a different approach had been taken earlier, in the inter-war period in Latvian modernist literature of the 1920–1930s: influenced by the decadence literature, the borderline between the “good” and the “evil” was deleted and an internally conflicting person was portrayed in a protest against national

ideology-based literature of positivism.

The table game played by two people with 16 white and 16 black pieces on a chessboard with 64 squares is defined “by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them” (Liotārs 25). One of the peculiarities of chess is the unexpected turns and its, often elegant, final technique, which creates a surprise effect. The game, which keeps the balance between the tactician’s ardent impetuosity of attack and the strategist’s steady coolness, offered the modernists all advantages for the interpretations of life as a game, as well as for revealing human’s “subtle afflictions.”

The defeat of the opponent in the competition of life as a short-time acquisition, since the deepest meaning and triumph in life are a victory over oneself, is presented by Pāvils Rozītis’ (1889–1937) in his poem “Dzīves šahs” [Chess of Life] from the collection *Sarunas* [Conversations] (1936). Taking responsibility for one’s own life is shown as a feature of human character which tells about the degree of human’s maturity, of his intellectual development and his potential of growth:

The formation of human’s character is the principal theme in the novel *Sava ceļa gājējs* [On Their Own Path] (1943) by Ēriks Ādamsons (1907–1946), a poet, prose-writer and professional translator, consequently, this highlights the idea that winning a game of chess is possible only after the ABC of life chess has been acquired, namely, only “pēc lielas cīņas starp savu pacietību no vienas un neattapību, izklaidību un pavisrību no otras puses” [after a tough fight between your patience, on the one hand, and your slow-wittedness, absent-mindedness and superficiality, on the other”] (Ādamsons 22).

Likewise, for Anšlavs Eglītis (1906–1993), one of the leading representatives of modernism among the young generation of the 1930s, chess, the same as life, is an aggregate of consecutive, intensive and regular-training-based actions, which in certain situations comes under the influence of external factors, unexpected turns and surprise, and for whose anticipation and prevention a calm mind, sporty frenzy and strong willpower are necessary. In one of his letters, the writer ironically writes:

Sliccos uz domu, ka šahs ir netikums, jo atņem ļoti daudz laika. Ar šaušalām domāju par to stundu bezgalību, ko mēs ar Mazīti nositām ar zibenspēli savā labākajā jaunībā! Vienu laiku bijām kā apsēsti. Šachojām katrā mazākajā brīvajā brīsnīnā. Kā lai to sauc par tikumu? Bet taisnība ir, šachisti saprotas acumirkli pāri visdažādākajām plaisām. Saprotams—uz ļoti šauras bāzes. Nekādu loģikas vai matemātikas izpratni tas šahs gan neveicina, (kā daži domā) varbūt jaunībā drusku audzina raksturu: palaisties uz paša spējām,

neatlaidību un neizsamist priekšlaicīgi. (Tūrismagids)

[I am inclined to think that chess is a vice, because it takes up much time. I am horrified when I think about those endless hours, we have killed at playing chess [...] in our best youth! For some time, we were like obsessed. We used every small moment to play chess. How can we call this a virtue? But that's true that chess-players instantly understand each other despite any barriers. Of course—on a very narrow base. That chess, naturally, does not promote any understanding of logic or mathematics, (as some people think) maybe in the youth it helps to form a character a bit: to rely on one's own abilities, persistence and not to be despaired beforehand.]

Similarly, in Ādamsons' collection of stories *Smalkās kaites* [Subtle Afflictions] (1937), which is one of the 14 values of the Latvian Cultural Canon in the branch of literature¹, the sense of chess is displayed, and its meaning is revealed through its interpretation of life. For the second generation of Latvian modernists, whose stories' plots and non-typical protagonists have been created within the frame of unexpected turns and anecdotal surprise elements, chess is also an original art that contributes to becoming an elegant person, dandy and outsider of the time. Interest in chess, which Anšlavs Eglītis developed in his early youth² and maintained throughout the whole life as one of his greatest passions, was stirred up by an occasion: an accidental meeting with the French master of chess Andre Cheron (1895–1980) when he underwent treatment in a Leysin sanatorium (Switzerland) in the middle of the 1920s (Vāvere and Kalniņa). Later, as a qualification tournament participant of the Riga chess club and since 1944 as a refugee in emigration, he successfully employed modern techniques of playing, once taught to him by the master, and fought “tooth and nail” to win victories. Occasionally, Eglītis' life passion gets reflected in psychological portrayals of his literary protagonists: both in arrangements and descriptions of heroes' hobbies and interpretations of life as a game, since “in life [they] like to speculate on different combinations and try out moves of chess pieces” (Hausmanis).

Though Latvian modernist writers of the 1920–1930s, in general, showed

1 More on 14 literary treasures included in Latvian Cultural Canon, see: Latvijas kultūras kanons [online].

2 As Eglītis' diary notes from 1925 show, depressed by the disease, he seeks help and relief in a game of chess: “I am occupied with chess all the time. Eyes ache from reading” (Vāvere, Kalniņa 183); “Right now I potter at chess. I bought ‘Der Schachturnier zu Baden-baden von Dr. Tanasch 1925’.” (Ibid. 188).

interest in chess, both in their life and creative writing, the pioneer of Latvian modern novelette Ezeriņš remains one of the keenest explorers of processes of social communication or “transactions” (Berns) by employing a game of chess within which its own reality, rules, hierarchy and “death” (transformation) are defined. Trying to avoid the heaviness of thought in his novelettes, the writer feels himself as a player, “whose first priority is not to express the quintessence through means of art, but rather a game, playing, charm” (Vilsons 654).

Jānis Ezeriņš’ *A Game of Chess*

*Un vēl viens varens vilciens —
Un baltā dāma krīt.*

*Ai, skaistā baltā dāma,
Tu Saha līgava!
Ar tevi pazaudēta
Ir visa partija!
(Doku Atis)*

[Another mighty blow —
And the white lady drops.

Oh, lovely white lady, You Shah’s¹ bride!
Losing you means
Losing a game!]

The novelette *A Game of Chess*, written in the form of memories, is considered one of the best of Ezeriņš’ psychological novelettes, where great attention is given to the construction of the plot and to speculations on human’s nature and destinies expressed as brief comments interweaving this plot and constituting a good part of the novelette (Vilsons 648, 650). The author depicts specific time before his birth by describing an incident between two lovers, that has once happened in summer of the second half of the nineteenth century, and dwells on the unexpected

1 Latvian nouns “šahs” [chess] and “šahs” [*Shah*—a title of the Persian monarch] are homophones and homographs and are used as a pun in the poem on chess and human relationships. At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Latvian written language was being formed, many foreign words, including chess terminology were Latvianized under the influence of literati, e.g. names of the chess pieces were updated by Matīss Kaudzīte (See: Rūķe-Draviņa).

consequences of this incident, appraised 30 years later after this past event. As an embedded narrative, it contains a story within a story, both being told by an old, grey-haired but still vigorous and joyful former scribe Mr. Sīlis. Having lost his home in a fire, he makes a drastic decision to transform his miserable life, and with the aim of saving the life roves around searching his once lost bride far and wide. On his journey, he decides to rent a room in the house of the former teacher known as the Vīcups. According to the tenant, as well as based on dialogues as exchanges of thoughts and memories between the two, the house owner, who has caught Mr. Sīlis' attention, is very vulnerable and has to be regularly consoled in his sad old-age. His depression has distorted his sense of perception of time and reminds his tenant of himself as he is “gandrīz tik pat skumjš un pieguris kā es gadu vai divus atpakaļ” [almost as sad and weary as me a year or two ago] (30).¹ The repetitions of adjectives and (“skumjš” [sad], “vecs” [old]) and nouns (“vecums” [age]) imply persistent intense feelings of sadness and loneliness in the house, since the owner's life, the same as legacy, “grimst dziļāk savas istabas mijkrēslī” [sinks deeper in the dusk of the room] (30). Having educated representatives of three age groups, now he feels neglected, pushed into a dark corner, and hated by the younger generations that perceive him as an old and odd person—the label he is aware of and agrees to. The mentions of his physical frailty and shrinking together with hints to his feeling of insignificance and self-worthlessness unveil his chronic lack of sense of belonging, paradoxically defined by him as “a curse of work” of great responsibility. The recognition vanished after the life dedicated solely to work and the feeling of senselessness of life negatively affect his physical and mental health, which is revealed in the literary work by the attributes denoting the phenomena of the outer world and symbolising the brutal power of nature (“aiz loga kļāvās iegulstas beidzamaiš vējš” [a gust of last wind lies down on the maple trees] (30)) as well as by using adverbs in the comparative degree (“istabā paliek tumšāk, klusāk, [the room becomes darker, quieter] (30)), i.e. expressive means which underline the intensity of pain, feeling of hopelessness and approaching death, as well as evoke a negative emotional response. The dark room as a representation of one's own heart becomes increasingly sombre, and grounding oneself in the secure reality of the self seems no more possible. While mourning over his life, awareness of having become a mere shadow of his younger self makes the old Vīcups so anxious that he finds relief only in tears and music he plays on the portative organ, which at times relieves his feelings of depression and anxiety and strengthens his motivation for

1 Here and henceforth the number in brackets after the quotes indicates a page number from Ezeriņš *Šaha partija* (1996).

communication.

Two outwardly similar (old age) but since recently inwardly opposite characters (joyful/ cheerful/ active Mr. Sīlis vs. sad/ depressed/ static Vīcups father) embody two different approaches to the perception of time and life, however, they strongly resemble each other as one sees himself (his past version) in the other, thus, the Vīcups father can be considered as Mr. Sīlis' double. For Vīcups, time has become non-existent or fragmentary, whereas his companion—Mr. Sīlis, having gone through painful and long transformation that he is just about to share, finally recognizes time as a unified system from the moment of one's birth to his passing away and sees attachment to specific moments as equal to the attachment to trifles. According to the tenant, seen as an entirety, time may provide a bird's-eye view of one's life, fill it with content, and eventually become life as such:

[...] mēs pārāk daudz pieķeramies taisni niekiem, atsevišķām sekundēm, nedēļām, gadiem, bet pārāk maz domājam, ka no svara ir tikai viss tas kopā. Šo skatu uz dzīvi mēs vēl nepazīstam, kaut gan viņam jātop par vienīgo un īsto. [...] Jo mūžam savās pretišķībās un izveidojumā jātop par cilvēka galveno darbu. Tad arī sapratīs, ka tie, kurus mēs paraduši nožēlot, bieži vien ir bijuši laimīgākie, un vienīgie, kurus līdz šim vērts apskaust—karaļi, kas savas galvas nolikusi uz ešafota. [...] Neviena mūžs, pat visseklākais, nav tiks tukšs, lai kaut ar savām kļūdām nedotu mums nekā. (32)

[[...] we get attached too much to trifles, isolated seconds, weeks and years, but give too little thought to the fact that only all those things taken together are what actually matters. We don't know this aspect of life yet, although it must become the only and the true one. [...] Because it is life itself with all of its contradictions and forms that must become human's main job. Then we would realize that those, whom we are used to be sorry for until now, often appear to have been the happiest and the only ones worth envying—kings who have given away their lives on the scaffold. [...] Not a single life, even the shallowest one, is so empty that, even via its errors, it can give us nothing.]

The old man's gradual opening up and being ready for a conversation, alongside a shift from the host's life to the event in the tenant's past, is a prelude to an embedded story that exemplifies the power of a personal choice to lessen the effect of an "occasion" on one's entire course of life. This curtain-raising paragraph marks a transition in the novelette and for the first time mentions the game of chess as a part of a thirty-year old story serving as a turning point in the then young scribe Mr.

Stilis' life with a long-lasting impact on his life:

Gadījums sabojā tikai dzīvi, bet dzīvot nepavēl ne te, ne tur. Viņš sakropļoja arī manu dzīvi—patiesībā tā bija kāda šaha partija—un es atnācu, lai kaut cik pielāpītu savu beigto mūžu. (33)

[Occasion spoils only life, but doesn't bid to live [...]. It ruined my life too—actually it was some game of chess—and I have come to mend my spoiled life a bit.]

Board games in general and chess in particular, are clearly related to the category of time as time in them is “compartmentalized in discrete temporal cells” (38). The tenant's story goes back the year of his youth when the young scribe and tenor of the choir fell in love with a chorister Miss Baumgarten. The feeling of love, joy and jubilation in work is conveyed by contextualizing the event within the most important national treasures of traditional culture—Midsummer's eve or the summer solstice (*Jāņi*), known for the sun cult and fertility rituals¹, and the 2nd All-Latvian Song Festival (*II Vispārīgie latviešu Dziedāšanas svētki*) (1880)—the hallmark of national unity; both serving as a code of Latvian cultural heritage. However, the familiar and “one's own” is supplemented and at the same time juxtaposed with the “non-native” and exotic elements such as coffee and a small box of chess found in a shop-café while wandering in the vibrant Old Riga during a free moment of the Song Festival:

Kafiju gaidot, nolēmām uzspēlēt partiju un darījām to smiedamies. Jāatzīstas, ka mana jaunkundze spēlēja ļoti vāji, kaut gan ar aizrautību. Man bija jāpieliek liekas pūles, lai izturētos pret savu dāmu ar vajadzīgo cienību un neapdraudētu pārāk bieži viņas karali. Šī centība un pieklājība pret līgavu, kā es toreiz sapratu, nogāja tik tālu, ka es ar nolūku taisīju aplamus vilcienus, lai viņa paliktu uzvarētāja. Un tā arī notika. (34)

[Waiting for our coffee, we decided to play a game of chess and did it, laughing. I must admit that my lady played rather badly, but full of enthusiasm. I had to make great effort to behave towards my lady with the necessary respect and would not expose her King to danger too frequently. These efforts and politeness towards the bride, as I understood then, went so far that I started making wrong moves on purpose for her to be a winner. And it happened so.]

1 More on the Midsummer's Eve celebrations see: Kovzele and Kacane.

This is the game that becomes “tīrais nieks” [a naughty trifle] in the tide of the time and changes humans’ destinies. The tension in the novelette is created through the motif of deliberately not capturing King (Sīlis’ intentional loss to his bride): by losing one’s King in the game of chess, the role of the “king” or the intended spouse of life is automatically annihilated. The writer’s depiction of a literary character who follows a medieval knight’s code of conduct and sacrifices his victory in the game of chess for the sake of victory of his love, whom he considers a weak but passionate opponent, is an ironic representation of the modern era when gender roles and relations were reassessed. The man’s defeat in chess leads to the bride’s coldness, alienation, separation, and belittling of her former partner among others by calling him an incapable and narrow-minded creature (“vientiesītis”, “nеспējīgs un aprobežots radījums”), which after understanding the reasons of a broken relationship weakens his morale and masculinity (psychological emasculation). The status of a simpleton and the psychological trauma he went through because of his desire to be polite are reasons why his world fell apart and he was penned up in a cage of loneliness, spite and intolerance, which symbolizes death. Symbolic transformation from being “alive” to “lifeless”, and the writer toying with elements of a binary opposition “alive” [a man] vs “lifeless” [a wooden chess figure], bring the category of statics/ paralysis and awareness about the destruction of a romantic prime origin into sharp focus:

Es nezinu, ko runā piedzēruši veči, bet, ka jūs, dzīvs cilvēks, nemākat nogāzt manu koka karali, to es zinu. Tad kā gan jūs domājat ieņemt viņa vietu? (36)
 [I don’t know what drunken gays talk about, but I do know that you, a living human being, can’t capture even my wooden King. Then, how do you think you can take his place?]

Though the following life-long and revengeful practice in chess gives Mr. Sīlis new victories in competitions, they no longer give him pleasure and eventually lead to the feeling of suffocation in an old and narrow vodka bottleneck, as well as a realization about the uselessness of his life. The deliberate loss in the game of chess to the love of his life and awareness of his own “stupidity” turn out to be relative, moreover, the “sapience” of the winner doesn’t ensure victory in life either. The feeling of a narrow escape and wasted time awakens him to save the “remains of the day”: “The narrator concludes that life can be picked up at any age and it isn’t over until it is over” (Liepiņa). Thus, the day he meets his ex-fiancé, he requests a revenge game:

Kā? Vai tad patiesi viņa domā spēlēt? Jā, viņa atgriezās ar vienīgām figūrām, kas bija veikalā, un spēle sākās. [...] Un, ja tur bija kas nelāgs, tad šo partiju es bezmaz paspēlēju. Vai nu mans uztraukums, vai arī vienkārši viņas labā spēle—es vēl tagad šaubos, ka tik viņa nav vingrinājusies visu mūsu blakus man uz kādu izšķirošu sacīksti [...]. Kad es beidzot sacīju mat, mani pirksti drebēja. [...]. (40)

[What? Does she really intend to play? Yes, she came back with the only chess pieces that were available in the shop, and the game began. [...] And, if there had been something wrong, I almost lost this game. Either my attack or simply her good playing—even now I have doubts about whether she has not been sitting next to me her whole life and practising to play together with me when I was getting ready for some important competition [...]. When at last I said “mate”, my fingers trembled [...].]

The victory gained in both game and life and the mutually achieved reconciliation, which makes it possible to celebrate a wedding at least to save the life (“mūžs ir jāglabj” (40)), are based on the opinion that “[...] ir jāiziet liela skola kā dzīves, tā šaha spēlē, lai iemācītos cienīt savu pretinieku” [[...] you have to receive good schooling in both life and game until you learn to respect your opponent in school of chess]] (37). The plot of Ezeriņš’ novelette is a manifestation of the writer’s humanism which highlights the significance of a human’s transformation from the awareness about an unsuccessful life to the awareness about the possibility of changing it, i.e. the essence of a meaningful life.

A game for Ezeriņš is a tool for mapping humans’ (un)intelligence and unleashing his/ her instincts; it is the means for both depicting the change in traditional roles of men and women and organizing reality and revealing unexpected situations and atypical occasions often covered by a veil of chaos. It is through a game element, which always structures spatial and temporal boundaries, that chaos is again turned into a systematic order.

Conclusion

Es tev lūdzu: spēlē šahu prieka pēc, bet nepadari to par sportu.

Rotaļa paliek rotaļa—lai arī tā būtu karaliskā.

(Rūdolfš Blaumanis)

[I am begging you: play chess for fun but don’t make it a sport.

A game remains a game—even if it is royal.]

Ezeriņš' novelette *A Game of Chess* is a masterpiece of psychological prose which differs from the literary heritage of both Latvian novelette writers of the early twentieth century and the second generation of modernists in the 1930s. By depicting the sad individual's soul and bitterness of internal pain, when young people ruin their own and each other's lives because of the male's loss in chess, the author provides an explanation of chess that resonates with the perception of a game as an aggregate of relationships or "a series of transactions—moves" (Berns). Ezeriņš' reflective narrative challenges the unequivocal portrayal of "good" or "evil" man and rejects a categorical solution to the problem; it brings into focus the rejection of binary opposition and transformations of ambivalence important in Modernism emphasizing the fact that life is a chance game where everything flows and changes. The replacement of the paradigm "ethical stability" for that of the "ethical relativism" (Smilktiņa *Novele* 213) testifies to the existence of the "essential" and the "accidental" as equally significant values. The awareness of human's subjective feelings and self-discovery is revealed in the aspect of accidents and time strata in the chain of reactions created by transactions. Thus, in Ezeriņš' novelette, chess is an unpredictable and risky psychological game—a game of time and fate that balances on the fragile border between "life" and "death" and functions as a metaphor for gender role confrontation signalling the transformation of the epoch and cultural space the prose work represents, i.e. moving from the romantic era into a new direction illuminated by Modernism. While describing "a trifle" on the background of the synthesized historical and cultural events from two centuries the author's dramatic irony reveals human in a situation where one's world is disrupted and where the expected is substituted by the unexpected.

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