

Nomination of Eugene Kerkay for the MN Chess Hall of Fame

by Nels Truelson

Born in Hungary on September 5, 1942, Eugene Kerkay reached the chess expert level while living in Budapest in 1968. In early 1971, he and his wife, Maria, immigrated to the United States, where they became naturalized citizens in 1976. However, while some things like citizenship required one to wait and be a little bit patient, Gene wasted no time at all in starting to make his mark on the Minnesota chess scene.

On April 3, 1971, Gene entered the MSCA's Easter Open as one of two unrated players. For not being one of Minnesota's "major" tournaments, it nevertheless boasted a relatively strong field (this was at the onset of the "Fischer boom," when a significant deflation in USCF ratings occurred), with five Class A players, two Experts, and the mighty Master Curt Brasket, who at 2316 was right smack in the middle of his nine-year streak of consecutive Minnesota State Champion titles. Since this was well before the 1980's surge in immigration from eastern Europe, no one took much notice when in round 1 Kerkay defeated another eastern European transplant, 1737-rated Eugene Swiderski who, four years back, had stormed upon the Minnesota chess scene by qualifying for the state playoffs as an unrated. Nor did a second-round victory over another Class B player raise any eyebrows. But when Gene upset Expert Robert Goble in round 3, tongues began to wag. There were now only three perfect scores remaining: Brasket, 2nd highest-rated Mort Hamermesh, and (who's that?) Eugene Kerkay. When the final round pairings came out with Brasket vs. Kerkay and Hamermesh being paired down to Class A Paul Shannon, the spectators were calmed with the firm knowledge that Brasket would restore the natural order of things by quickly dispatching Kerkay, and then waiting to see if he would have to share prize money with Hamermesh.

It was not to be. Shannon held Hamermesh to a draw, which was not unusual, but the same result occurred on Board 1, leaving a three-way tie for first place. That was unthinkable. Sure, Curt would sometimes offer draws to secure first place prize money or a state title, but here? With the tournament on the line? And against an unrated? Back in that era, this simply didn't happen. The one lasting effect of this little Easter skirmish was that henceforth, Minnesota chess players were not going to underestimate Eugene Kerkay again.

I myself faced Gene for the first time later that year at the Minneapolis Open, when I succumbed to him in round 3. At least this time his 2nd highest rating of 2119 allowed for a premonition. Gene followed this up by holding top-rated Brasket to a draw in round 4. Again. He then went on to overcome the tougher pairing in round 5 to share the title with Brasket by defeating Robert Goble. Again.

Eugene Kerkay was active in pretty much every chess institution the Minnesota community had to offer. In June of 1971, he first played for the Minnesota team in its perennial match-up against Manitoba, winning on Board 6. In 1974 and 1975, Gene held down Board 1 for Minnesota. He played on Twin Cities Chess League teams from 1973 through 1991. While he

played for several different teams, I most fondly remember the later years when Gene was my teammate on "The Oldtimers," particularly when we won the top division's title in the 1989-1990 season. For many consecutive years, Gene performed simultaneous exhibitions at the St. Paul Festival of Nations, and advocated for greater U.S. chess education, especially in the schools.

Most of all, however, Gene loved tournament chess. I suspect this had something to do with his fighting spirit. While I had faced him countless times in tournaments, I can barely recall any of those games resulting in draws. And in tournaments, he excelled. Already mentioned was his Minneapolis Open triumph in the year of his arrival, but he also conquered many other of Minnesota's "major" events, including the Aquatennial Open in 1973, back-to-back Twin City Opens in 1974 and 1975, the North Dakota Open of 1978 and three Minnesota Exurban Championships in 1974, 1988, and 1993.

Of all tournaments, Gene was clearly most drawn to those leading to the coveted title of Minnesota State Champion. He participated in 20 Minnesota Opens from 1972 through 1996, becoming co-champion twice in 1975 and 1978. Gene qualified for and played in nine state champion playoffs, with his *magnum opus* coming in 1989. There, exhibiting his typical fighting spirit, Gene distanced the field by a full point and a half at 4-1, and played no game to a draw.

Speaking again of premonitions, after this victory Eugene Kerkay revealed to a Star Tribune reporter that he had told me in 1988 "...that he would win this year." I remember it clearly; Gene offering this prediction matter-of-factly with his characteristically broad grin. Accordingly, I didn't take it all that seriously. I guess I should have been listening better!

I am pleased to submit for consideration the nomination of a most worthy candidate for induction into the Minnesota Chess Hall of Fame: Eugene Kerkay.