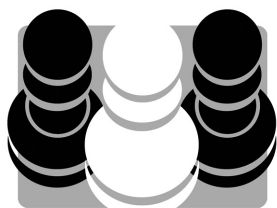


Grandmaster Repertoire 20

The Semi-Slav

By

Lars Schandorff



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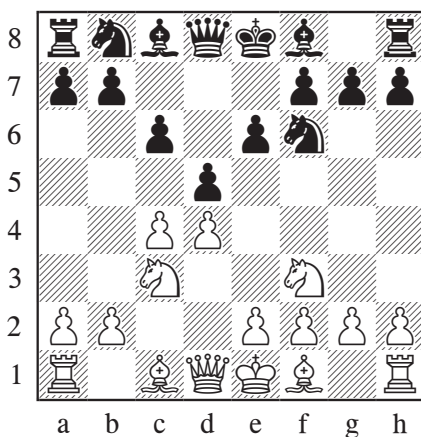
Introduction and Move Order

*And some people say it's just rock and roll
Oh but it gets you right down to your soul*
– Nick Cave

Do you know the feeling? I certainly do. Suddenly you don't fancy having Black anymore. It wasn't always like this of course: you used to have a pet opening. Right from the beginning it just felt natural, almost like love at first sight. You and your new favourite line were a real couple back then, weren't you? Interesting games, good results, lots of laughs, never looking back. But that was years ago! Be honest, these days you have lost some of the early enthusiasm. The picture has begun to crack. The original bravery and creativity has long since been replaced by the boredom of routinely making the same moves over and over again. And the results have declined as well.

But cheer up, friend! I think I might have the solution for you.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 e6



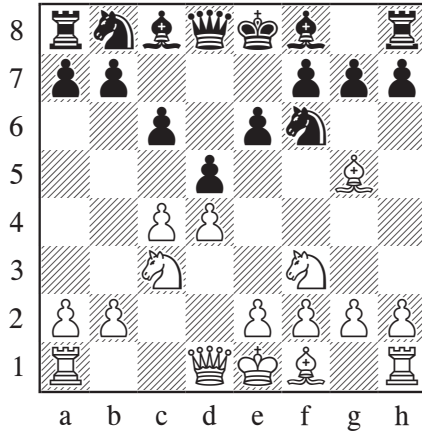
The Semi-Slav! It has served me well, on and off, throughout most of my chess career. I played it exclusively around the time I became a grandmaster, and so a lot of pleasant memories are closely attached to it. Even now, many years later, some of the games still stand out vividly in my mind.

The Semi-Slav is one of the deepest and most complex opening concepts ever devised. At first glance the Semi-Slav is just another sound and solid variation of the classical Queen's Gambit, where Black apparently bolsters the important d5-pawn and secures his share of the centre. But there is a hidden world underneath – full of Scary Monsters and Super Creeps as Bowie sings.

In its modern interpretation the Semi-Slav is truly a dynamic, fighting opening. The key to the complications lies with the seemingly innocuous ...dxc4. This shouldn't be mistaken for a premature surrender of the centre; in fact it is a clever initiation of activity. Black immediately follows up with ...b5 and takes the initiative on the queenside. The queen's bishop is developed to b7 and – after a well-timed ...c5 – springs to life as one of the finest pieces on the board. If

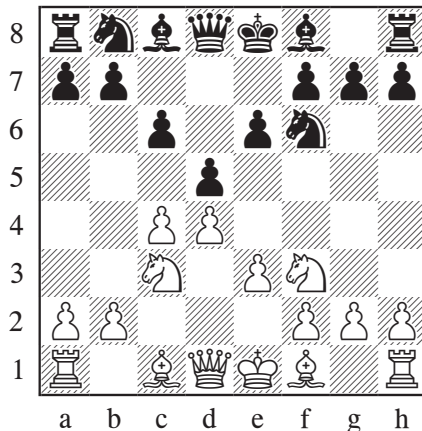
White does not strike back he will quickly be worse. Routine moves are not enough – White's only chance for an advantage is to gain the initiative himself. There is no way he can avoid the challenge and settle for a small positional plus: Black's position is not only perfectly sound, it is also extremely flexible and ready to neutralize any quiet schemes. Many White players will be forced out of their comfort zone – that's why they hate facing the Semi-Slav!

5.♘g5



The most aggressive move, which is covered in great detail in the first part of the book. Already Black has an important choice: he can go for the uncompromising Botvinnik Variation with 5...dxc4!? – an often unpopular line that I am proud to say we fully rehabilitate in this piece of work – or he can choose the more subtle 5...h6, when it is suddenly White who has to make a major decision. White can keep playing for the initiative with the speculative pawn sacrifice 6.♘h4, also known as the Anti-Moscow Variation, or settle for the 'normal' Moscow with the solid 6.♘xf6 – which surrenders the bishop pair.

5.e3



The second part of the book is dedicated to this seemingly innocent move – a lifelong favourite of the Soviet World Champion Anatoly Karpov. White stands more actively in a symmetrical position, which is enough to develop some initiative and hope for a small positional advantage. However, Black uses his flexibility and the dynamic factors of the opening to the maximum benefit.

5...♘bd7

Now Black is ready to answer the natural 6.♘d3 with the thematic 6...dxc4 7.♘xc4 b5 – the so-called Meran Variation – when he keeps his full share of the chances in a double-edged and demanding position.

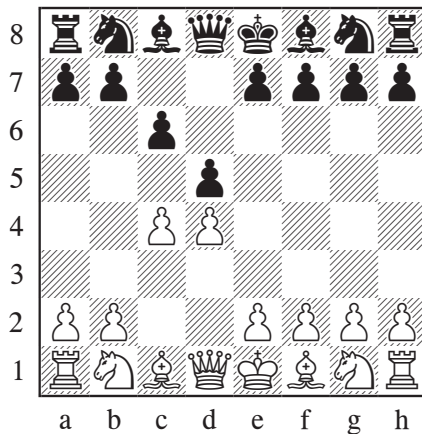
White can try to keep more control with 6.♗c2 – the Anti-Meran – by keeping all options open. In return, Black answers with 6...♘d6 and keeps ...dxc4 in reserve for an appropriate moment.

The third and final part of the book is about all the rest: ranging from the Exchange Variation 5.cxd5, via the protection of the vulnerable c-pawn with 5.♗b3, to a Catalan-type set-up with 5.g3. These attempts lead to very different kinds of positions, but they do have one thing in common – Black is absolutely fine no matter how White may try to confuse him.

All in all the Semi-Slav is the perfect choice for Black against 1.d4. It is a solid, positionally sound, and well-respected opening. Yet Black has excellent winning chances, thanks to the opening's hidden layer – full of dynamic possibilities – where creativity and originality reign. To put it more bluntly, the Semi-Slav is reliable on the surface, but wild at heart.

So much for the praise, now the big question is how do we get there? As you can see, the book starts after the first four moves when the position that initiates the Semi-Slav is on the board. But a lot of things have already happened during these four simple moves, or rather a lot of things could have happened! Throughout the book I have chosen the Slav move order:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6

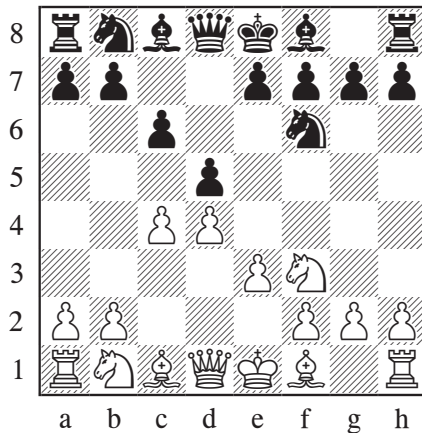


Here White can, for instance, play the Exchange Variation 3.cxd5 cxd5. I am sure some of you won't be too happy to allow that, so be aware! Personally I don't mind; I am a realistic guy. I mean, I cannot prevent White from equalizing! So if he wants to take on d5 he is welcome.

Then I will just be content to have an okay game with Black, without too many problems after only a few moves.

There is another popular Anti-Slav line that needs to be mentioned, namely:

3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.e3



At first this seems pretty harmless, but in fact it is a well worked-out system full of positional subtleties. Let's take the following natural continuation as an example:

4...♙f5 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘h4

White will try to gain the pair of bishops and hope to have a slight long-term advantage. Black's position is perfectly playable: I merely wish to point out that you should know the line exists.

Of course we could try 4...e6 instead of ...♙f5, which is in the style of the Semi-Slav, but White is not forced to play ♘c3. He can try 5.b3 and put the knight on d2 instead, with some differences compared to the lines I examine in the book. Again the message is the same – Black has nothing to fear, but you must be aware that White can play this way.

If you want to avoid this Slav discussion it is tempting to protect d5 with the e-pawn first:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6

This makes sense, but it doesn't solve all our move-order problems. The most obvious example arises immediately:

3.♘c3

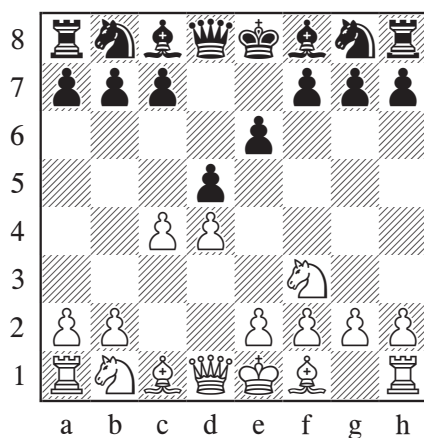
Now we have a dilemma, since if Black continues with 3...♘f6 White can play 4.♙g5 or 4.cxd5. Suddenly we are trapped in a Queen's Gambit, which is completely different to a pure Semi-Slav. To get where we want to go, we are more or less forced to play:

3...c6

But now White has the dangerous Marshall Gambit at his disposal.

4.e4!?

Of course you can defend with Black, but it is necessary to know what you are doing if you face a well-prepared opponent. And I haven't even mentioned White's most flexible move of all yet:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3

What to do now as Black? The triangular move 3...c6 springs to mind, but then White can try a move like 4.♞c2! or even develop flexibly with 4.e3, when Black can no longer get his light-squared bishop out to f5. Problems, problems!

3...♘f6

And on this natural reply White has another small surprise in store:

4.g3

The Catalan! Not exactly what we set out to play. Still, none of these scenarios is in any way catastrophic for Black, and if you have a good set-up versus the Catalan then you don't have to worry too much about it. What is important is that each Black player finds his way of reaching the Semi-Slav. I prefer the Slav way, because I am not too scared of the anti-systems there, and if you have a broad opening repertoire you have many options yourself. I have seen world-class players, like the former World Champion Vishy Anand, use the move order 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6, meaning that on 3.♘c3 he is ready to play a Nimzo-Indian after 3...♗b4. After 3.♘f3 he goes 3...d5 4.♘c3 c6 and here we are; although allowing the Catalan on the way was part of the package.

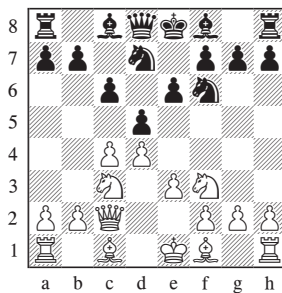
There is more than one option – the important thing is to choose something that suits you. There are many sources you can consult on the way. Boris Avrukh's excellent *GM 17 – The Classical Slav* is especially useful if you play the Slav move order, and is from the same series as the present book. If you want to go even further back, Avrukh also deals with sidelines after 1.d4 d5 in *GM 11 – Beating 1.d4 Sidelines*.

And now I think we are ready to jump to move 5 and let the real book begin!

Lars Schandorff
Copenhagen, June 2015

Chapter 14

Anti-Meran



Various 7th Moves

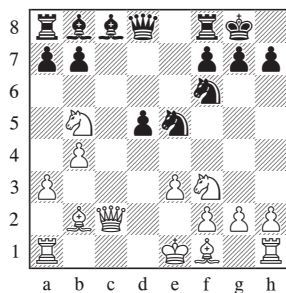
Variation Index

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3 e6 5.e3 ♗bd7 6.♙c2

6...♗d6

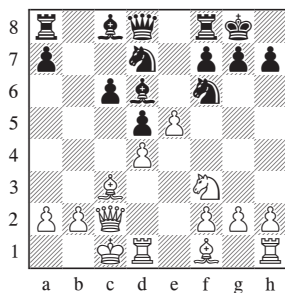
A) 7.a3	176
B) 7.♗d2	177
C) 7.e4	179

A) after 12.♗b2



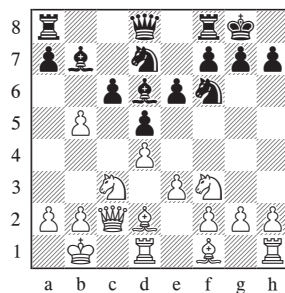
12...♗xf3†N

B) note to 9.cxb5



12...♗e7!N

B) after 10.♗b1



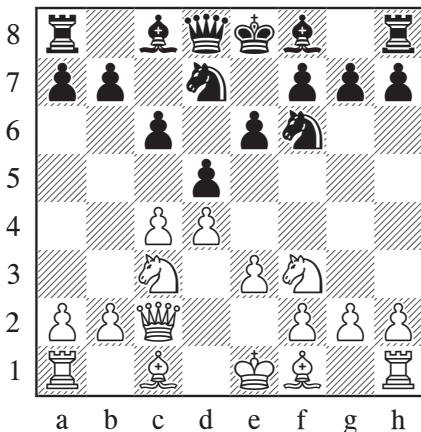
10...♙b8!N

*Don't let me hear you say life's taking you
nowhere, angel*

– David Bowie

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3 e6 5.e3
♗bd7 6.♞c2

The so-called Anti-Meran Variation; White avoids the forcing play of a pure Meran and simply develops his queen to a good square. Now it is less attractive for Black to take on c4 because the white bishop will only use one move to recapture. The good thing about ♞c2 – from Black's perspective that is! – is that it is not particularly threatening. White is not ready to castle short and launch e3-e4 in the centre like in the Meran, which means that Black can go on with his own development. In general 6.♞c2 leads to a quieter, more positional game than 6.♗d3, but there are exceptions as we will soon see. By the way, the Anti-Meran was also a favourite of the legendary Anatoly Karpov – he could really excel in its positional subtleties. But so can we!



6...♗d6

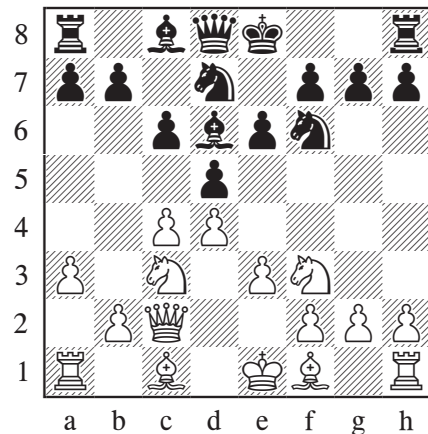
The standard move. If Black wants to leave more theoretically trodden paths he can try 6...b6!?, which is a pet move of the big Semi-Slav connoisseur Alexei Dreev. I had the honour of facing him in it – I was White! – and already in the pre-game preparation I

realized that it wasn't easy to find anything tangible with White. The game proved that – it was a pretty clean draw – so I can recommend delving deeper into the favourite line of the Russian expert if you need an alternative to the main line.

After 6...♗d6 play can branch out in very different directions. In this chapter I will examine the rare tries **A) 7.a3**, **B) 7.♗d2** and **C) 7.e4**.

In the next chapter I will move on to one of the most important sidelines, the flexible 7.b3. After that in Chapter 16 we will go berserk with 7.g4!?, a crazy but dangerous move that was extremely popular at a time when it seemed White could play g2-g4 at an early stage in virtually all openings! Finally in Chapters 17 and 18, I come to the absolute main lines that arise after 7.♗e2 or 7.♗d3. It will be quite a journey, so let's go!

A) 7.a3

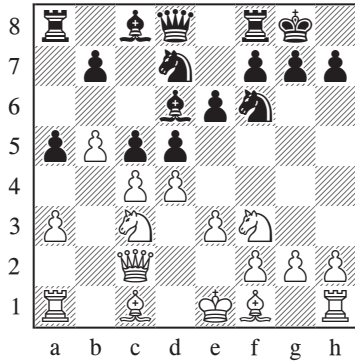


A continuation which is sporadically used by reasonably strong grandmasters. There is nothing really wrong with it, except the fact that Black has two continuations leading to dynamically equal positions.

7...0-0 8.b4 e5!

The most direct and thematic way, but not the only solution.

8...a5 9.b5 c5! should also be fine for Black. For example:

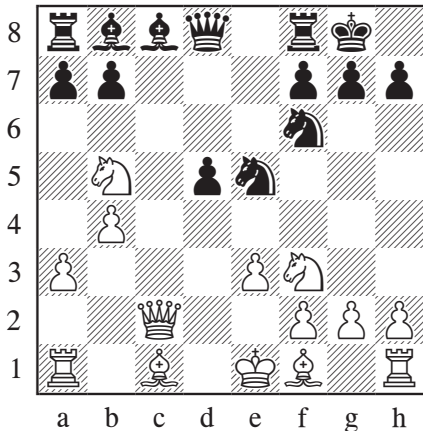


10.cxd5 exd5 11.♙e2 b6 12.♙b2 ♙b7 13.0-0 ♜c8 14.♞fd1 ♞e7= Black had her fair share of the chances in Dao Thien Hai – Zso. Polgar, Muenster 1994.

9.cxd5

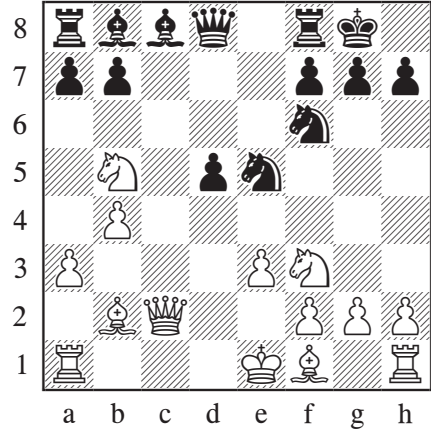
9.c5?! ♙c7 10.♙e2 ♞e8 is the wrong way forward for White. His offensive on the queenside has come to a halt while Black's pleasant space advantage on the kingside begins to count.

9...cxd5 10.♘b5 ♙b8 11.dxe5 ♘xe5



12.♙b2

12.♘e5N ♙xe5 gives Black the initiative, based on the fact that 13.♙b2 is met by 13...♙f5! 14.♞xf5 ♙xb2 15.♞b1 g6 16.♞d3 ♙e5.



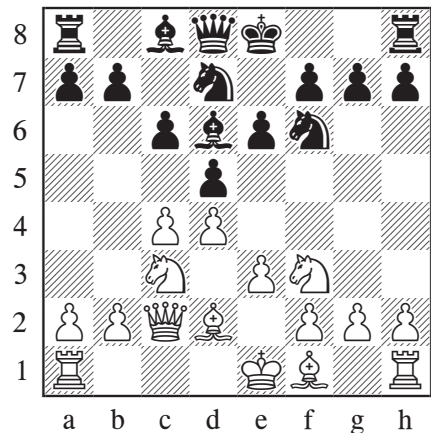
12...♘xf3†N

12...♞e7 has done okay in practice but spoiling White's structure is tempting, logical and the most ambitious.

13.gxf3 a5!⇝

White's king is still in the centre, thus he is the one who must be careful in this position.

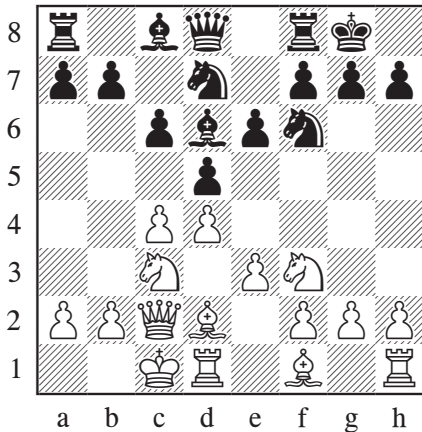
B) 7.♙d2



White plans 0–0–0 which is an interesting idea. The move is often associated with Mark Taimanov, who played this way with White on several occasions.

7...0–0 8.0–0–0

Now, with castling on opposite sides, I recommend a gambit to grab the initiative!



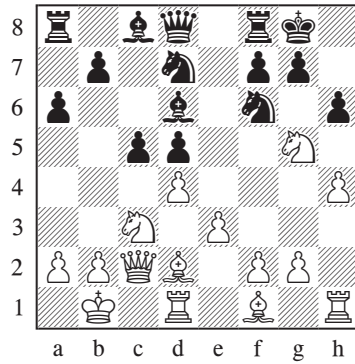
8...b5!

Of course there are calmer alternatives:

8...e5 is also adequate it seems. The main line continues 9.cxd5 cxd5 10.♖b5 ♘b8 11.dxe5 ♗xe5 12.♗xe5 ♙xe5 13.♙c3 ♙xc3 14.♗xc3 ♙e6 and Black is equal according to Dreev, although it is not everybody's cup of tea to play this IQP position. For example, after 15.♞d4 ♞c8 16.♙d3 White went on to win in McNab – Radovanovic, Coulsdon 2005.

8...c5 has the idea of ...a6 and ...b5 with a counterattack, while the tension in the centre doesn't allow White to build his flank attack so easily. At least this is what seemed to be the case, but the following line changed my opinion: 9.cxd5 exd5 10.♗b1 a6 11.♗g5! (Probably the most well known game played in this position was Taimanov – Botvinnik, Moscow 1952, where the much softer 11.♙c1 was seen. Botvinnik won a masterpiece

worth studying after 11...c4!) 11...h6 12.h4!



This was seen in Cossin – Gustafsson, Rogaska Slatina 2010. I analysed this position for quite some time and after 12...cxd4N I am pretty sure that White doesn't have an objective advantage, but the lines are quite sharp. Ultimately I don't like having such a knight thrown in my face, so there is no need to go down that road in a relatively rare continuation.

9.cxb5

The most popular choice.

9.c5 is best statistically for White according to my database but, after 9...♙c7 10.♙d3, which was seen in Istratescu – Kasimdzhanov, Kemer 2007, I like 10...a5!N best, followed by ...♙a6 with a good game for Black.

9.e4 b4 10.e5 bxc3 11.♙xc3 ♙e7 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♗e5 dxc4! (13...♙b7 14.c5 ♗d7 15.♙d3 h6 16.f4 gave White serious attacking chances in Vyzmanavin – Kramnik, Moscow 1994.) 14.♗xc6 ♞c7 15.♗xe7 ♞xe7 16.♙xc4 ♙b7 17.d5 ♗xd5 18.♙xd5 ♙xd5 19.♞he1 ♞b7 20.♞e3 ♞ac8 21.♗b1 f6+ Saric – Brkic, Pula 2008.

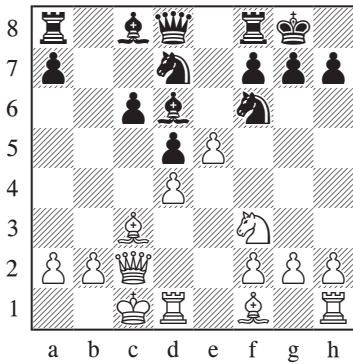
9.cxd5 exd5 10.e4

10.♙d3 b4 11.♗a4 allows Black to protect

his pawn with ...♙b7 but more ambitious is 11...♖b8!?, the following game being a nice example: 12.♗xc6 ♖e7 13.♙b1 ♘e4 14.♙e1 ♘df6 15.♖c1 ♙f5 16.♗a6 ♖fc8 17.♙c2 ♙d7 18.♘c5 ♙b5 19.♗a5 ♘xc5 20.dxc5 ♖xc5 21.♙xb4 ♖xc2 22.♖xc2 ♙xb4 Black was completely winning in Gohla – Hentze, email 2006.

10...b4 11.e5 bxc3 12.♙xc3

So far this is Honfi – Paoli, Reggio Emilia 1962, and now, just as in the line above with 9.e4, we play:

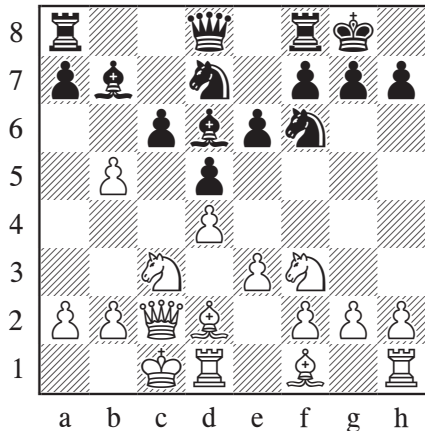


12...♙e7!N 13.exf6 ♘xf6 14.♘e5 ♗b6

Followed by ...♙e6 and ...♖b8 with a promising position.

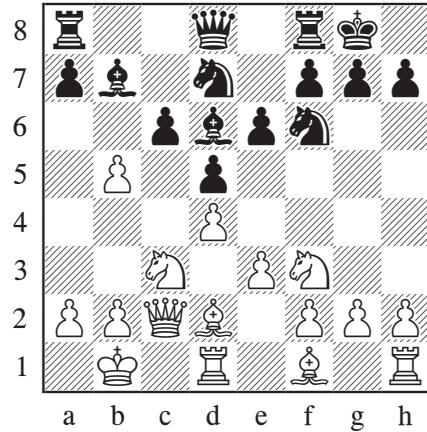
9...♙b7!

9...c5 10.e4 ♙b7 11.dxc5 ♙xc5 12.exd5 exd5 is not so clear after 13.♙f4!N.



10.♙b1

10.bxc6 ♙xc6 11.♙b1 ♖b8! Black followed up with ...♗b6 and ...♖fc8 with great play for the pawn in Matveeva – Gunina, Moscow 2010.



10...♗b8!N

A nice move by the queen! Black will play ...♖c8 next and maybe even ...a6 to force White to open some lines. In some cases he can go ...c5 instead, for example if White plays his bishop to d3. All in all I prefer Black.

In practice Black has also done well with other moves.

10...♖b8!? 11.h4 ♗e7 12.♘g5 ♖fc8 was excellent for Black in Petkov – Semkov, Sofia 1992, but White can certainly improve on his dubious 11th move.

10...c5!? 11.dxc5 ♘xc5 12.♘d4 ♘ce4 was level in Galanov – Papenin, email 2008.

C) 7.e4

White is not quite ready for such active operations.

7...♘xe4 8.♘xe4 dxe4 9.♗xe4