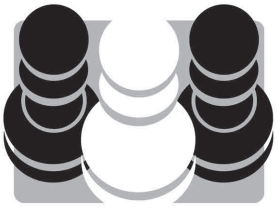
The Chess Alchemist

By

Mikhail Tal

Compiled by

Oleg Stetsko



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Publisher's Foreword

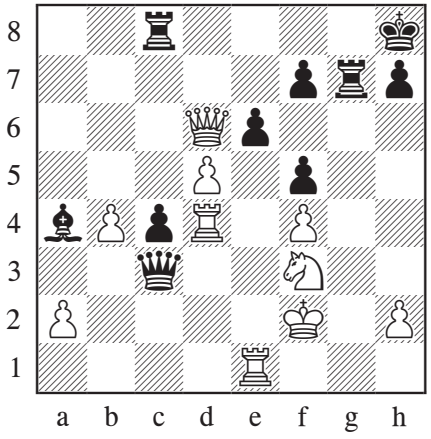
What you have in your hands is the closest thing there is to a book of *The Best Games of Mikhail Tal* annotated by the eighth World Champion. Tal wrote a few wonderful books, including *The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*, one of the greatest chess books of all time. But that book stops in 1975, so a full book on his best games, annotated by the great man himself, has not existed until this book of annotations, compiled by Oleg Stetsko.

Quality Chess has previously published a trilogy by Tibor Karolyi on the best games of Mikhail Tal, which covered his full career. This book is different in that it offers the reader games from four decades of Tal's career, all annotated by Tal himself. It is not meant to replace all the other superb books on Tal, but to add to them and be a one-stop starting place for those who want to get a full overview of his career. You can see a longer list of books by or about Tal on page 373.

Tal died in 1992, but the last annotated game we have from him is his win against Meduna in the German Bundesliga of 1989. At the time Tal was living in Germany and his health was poor, as it had been throughout his life. His last classical win was in a tumultuous game against a player who seven years later was a finalist in the Las Vegas World Championship Tournament.

Mikhail Tal – Vladimir Akopian

Barcelona 1992



White was better in the early middlegame, but after a wild foray on the queenside, searching for cheap loot, the white queen got kicked around and the white king was in danger. But Akopian misplayed the attack and was struck down by the last-ever dose of Tal magic:

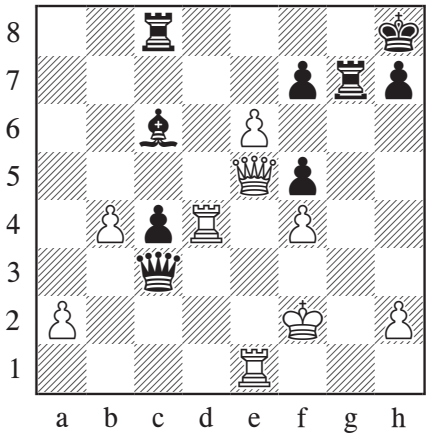
30.dxe6! ♗c6

30...fxe6 31.♖g1! ♖xg1 32.♕e5† would be similar to the game.

31.♘g5!! ♖xg5 32.♕e5†

The point of the combination. White exploits the looseness of the black queen.

32...♖g7



33.♖d8† ♖xd8 34.♕xc3 f6 35.e7 ♖a8 36.♕xf6 ♗e4 37.♖g1 ♖xa2† 38.♔e1
1–0

Mikhail Tal was only World Champion for a year, before he lost the title in the return match to Botvinnik. That was over 60 years ago, but his ability to capture the imagination of chess fans has endured and will continue to do so for decades to come.

Grandmaster Jacob Aagaard
Glasgow, February 2022

Creative achievement

Game 16

Mikhail Tal – Mikhail Botvinnik

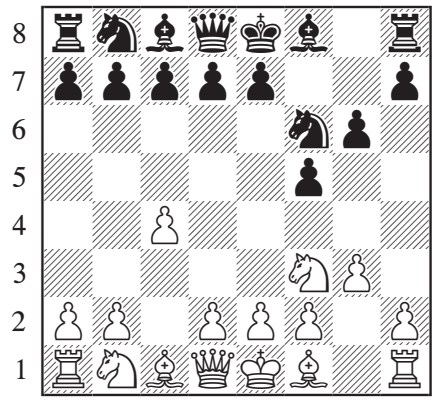
World Championship, Moscow (19) 1960, *Dutch Defence (A87)*

1.c4 f5

The first surprise. To my knowledge the Dutch Defence had not figured recently in Botvinnik's repertoire. However, given the situation in the match, he had to try to complicate the struggle, and this choice of opening was ideally suited to the task. After thinking for a short while, I decided (recalling that Botvinnik's favourite system was a Stonewall set-up) to refrain from an immediate d2-d4, so that if appropriate I could "ram the wall" with d2-d3 and e2-e4.

2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.g3 g6

The second surprise, and this time a much bigger one – the Leningrad System had never been seen before in Botvinnik's practice. His choice of it can be explained, once again, by psychological considerations.

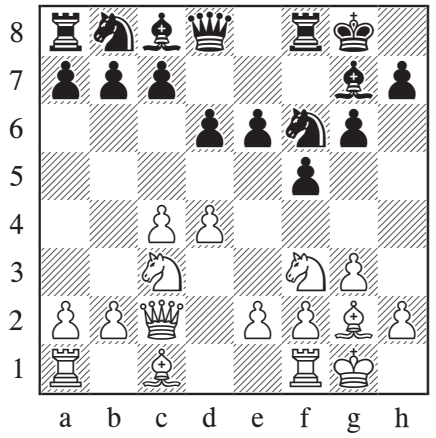


4.♗g2 ♗g7 5.d4 d6 6.♘c3 e6

A rare continuation, but in my view not a bad one. Black puts a stop to d4-d5 which would have given the white king's knight a convenient post on d4 or even, in some circumstances, on e6. In addition the e7-square is cleared for Black's pieces, in the first place his queen. He can strive for the freeing advance ...e6-e5 despite losing one tempo.

7.0–0 0–0 8.♕c2

White aims to carry out e2-e4 as quickly as possible, after which Black's weaknesses in the centre will be very palpable. The same purpose could be served by 8.♖e1, but then Black might reply 8...♘e4, and the placing of the bishop on g7 would prove its worth.



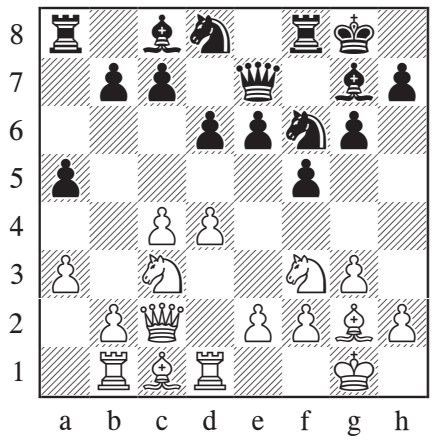
8...♘c6 9.♖d1

Better than 9.d5 ♘b4 10.♕b3 ♘a6 11.♗e3 ♘g4.

9...♕e7 10.♖b1

The black knight on c6 is occupying too good a position, so White takes steps to drive it away. The obvious 10.a3 would be less active, for White's plan is b2-b4-b5 with ♗a3 to follow, radically preventing ...e6-e5. However, Black now compels his opponent to occupy the a3-square with the pawn.

10...a5 11.a3 ♘d8

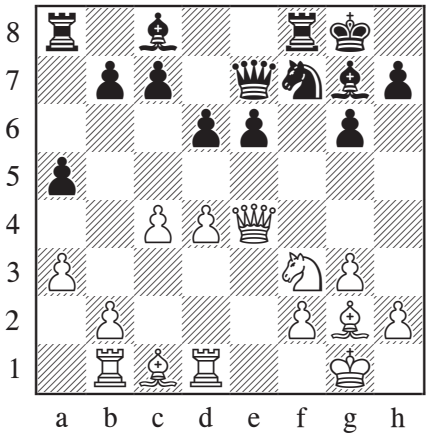


12.e4 fxe4

It looked very risky to play 12...e5; once the game is opened up, the superior development of White's pieces could tell. I intended to continue with 13.♗g5 and meet 13...c6 with 14.c5!?, creating complications in the centre that appeared to favour White. Botvinnik prefers to improve the position of his pieces by exchanging on e4.

13.♘xe4 ♘xe4 14.♕xe4 ♘f7

Black is just on the point of playing ...e6-e5 in complete comfort. A factor contributing to this is the placing of White's queen and rook on the same diagonal (observe, by the way, that 14...e5 is not good at once in view of 15.dxe5 ♗f5 16.♕d5†).



15.♗h3!

Again White prevents ...e6-e5; after the exchange of light-squared bishops, the pawn on b7 would be undefended and Black's attack on the kingside would not be sufficient. Nonetheless I had to bear in mind that my kingside *was* being somewhat weakened.

15...♕f6

With the "threat" to win a pawn by 16...d5. I decided not to prevent this, as the resulting position was very much to my liking.

16.♗d2 d5

Botvinnik nonetheless carries out the advance which has served him truly and faithfully for many a year, even though the pawn will only remain on d5 for one move.

However, preparation for ...e6-e5, in the spirit of the variation he chose in this game, would have been better. A good move for Black would seem to be the calm 16...c6!. Then in answer to 17.♗c3 he could either continue 17...e5 18.♗xc8 ♖axc8 19.dxe5 dxe5 with the threat of ...♘d6, or else play 17...d5 under better conditions than in the game.

An inadequate try would be 16...♗d7 17.♕xb7 ♘d8 18.♕xa8 ♗c6 19.♕xa5 ♕xf3 20.d5 ♗d4 21.♗g2!.

We may say that the opening system adopted by Botvinnik in this game has withstood the test, and that after 16...c6 the chances would be about equal. Now Black wins a pawn, but his position is full of weaknesses.

17.♕e2

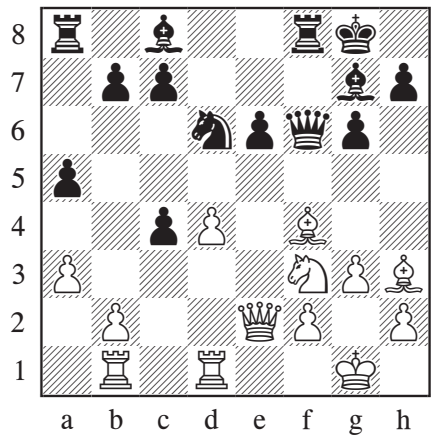
Of course not 17.cxd5? exd5.

17...dxc4

Against 17...♘d6 White would acquire a formidable initiative by 18.♘e5 dxc4 19.♖bc1 b5 20.b3.

For the moment Black guards the e5-square, stopping the white knight from invading.

18.♗f4 ♘d6



19.♘g5

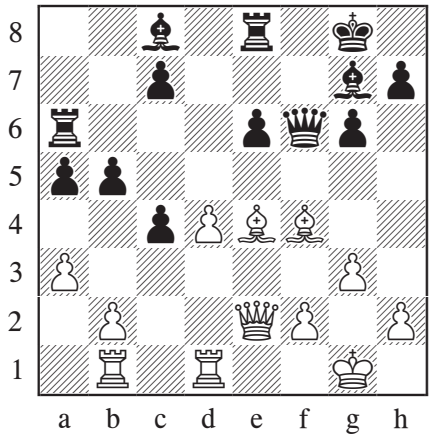
This now looks even stronger than 19.♘e5. White's chief aim is to exchange off the knight on d6, after which both his bishops will be able to go after the queenside pawns. In view of the attack on the e6-pawn, Black is forced to use up a tempo.

19...♖e8 20.♗g2

The bishop has fulfilled its function on the h3-c8 diagonal. Now the development of Black's queenside is made exceedingly difficult. In the event of 20...♗d7 21.♘e4 ♘xe4 22.♗xe4 ♗c6 23.♗xc6 bxc6, all three pawns on the c-file will be White's prey. Black is forced to develop his pieces by means that are far from the most aesthetic.

20...♖a6 21.♘e4 ♘xe4 22.♗xe4 b5

There is no improvement in 22...♕f7 23.♕xc4 e5 24.♗d5! ♗e6 25.dxe5, with an extra pawn for White.



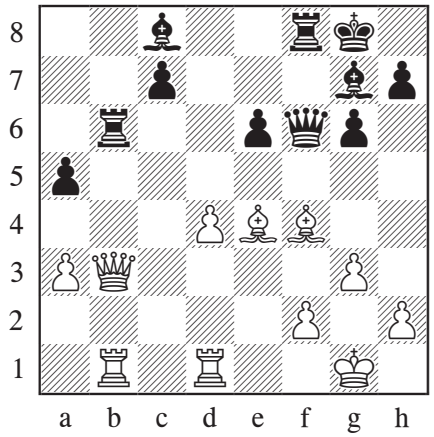
23.b3

A break which enables White to utilize his queenside superiority.

23...cxb3 24.♕xb5 ♖f8 25.♕xb3

A simple and good continuation, but during the game it seemed to me that 25.♖bc1!, activating the rook at once, was even stronger. The pawn on b3 would present no special danger. That indeed is how I would probably have played in any other game. I justified my decision with the thought that after 25...♖b6 26.♕xa5 e5 27.dxe5 ♕f7 the position would be very sharp. That is true, but White's advantage would be indubitable. The move I played also preserves an appreciable advantage, but I feel it is not energetic enough and allows Black a certain breathing space.

25...♖b6



26.♕e3

In my view this is stronger than 26.♕c2 ♖xb1 27.♖xb1 ♕e7, gaining time by attacking the a3-pawn.

26...♖xb1 27.♗xb1 ♗b7

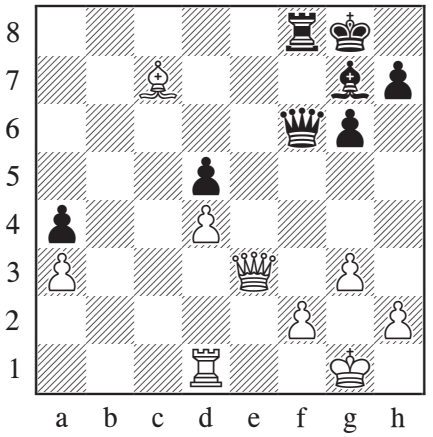
Realizing that the loss of a pawn is not to be averted in any case, Black tries to create counterplay. To some extent he succeeds.

28.♗a2

If 28.♗xc7, then 28...♗h6! is unpleasant. Before anything else White exchanges the light-squared bishops.

28...♗d5 29.♗xd5 exd5 30.♗xc7 a4

Black has positional compensation for his pawn. The white pawns on a3 and d4 could prove to be irksome ballast in the endgame, after for instance 31.♗e5 ♕f3. In a situation of mutual time shortage White decides to keep all the pieces on the board and attempts to seize the initiative on the kingside. I should add that on d3 the rook will not only perform aggressive functions (as will be seen in the further course of the game) but will also be protecting the a3-pawn.



31.♖d3 ♕f5 32.♗e5 ♗h6

White's plan completely succeeds after 32...♖e8 33.♕e2 ♗xe5 34.♖e3, when his major piece battery comes into operation. With his last move Black avoids the exchange of bishops, but his kingside is now in a weakened state.

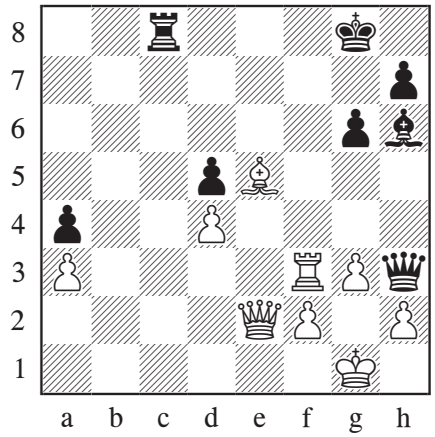
33.♕e2 ♖c8 34.♖f3

White sets a trap, which Botvinnik in time trouble misses. Actually in this position there is no better move, for the endgame after 34.♔g2 ♕e4† would be wholly acceptable to Black.

34...♕h3

Reckoning only with 35.♖d3, but there is disappointment in store.

A better move was 34...♖c2!, forcing an exchange of queens after all. It is true that the rook endgame arising from 35.♖xf5 ♖xe2 36.♖f6 ♗g7 37.♖a6 ♗xe5 38.dxe5 ♖xe5 39.♖xa4 ♖e1† 40.♔g2 ♖a1 41.♖a7 looked like a win for White.



35.♗c7!

White defends and counterattacks. Of course the bishop cannot be taken because of mate in two moves. Furthermore White is threatening 36.♕e7.

35...♗f8

Not the best defence, as Black is again overlooking a tactical nicety. It would of course be a pity to withdraw his queen from the active h3-square, but 35...♕d7 was nonetheless preferable. White would then continue 36.♗f4, with an important tempo gained.

36.♕b5!

The right square, as e5 is needed for the bishop. If Black tries capturing the bishop this time, he loses his rook after a couple of checks. In the event of 36...♕h5 37.♖f4 ♖xc7 38.♖xf8† ♔xf8 39.♕b8†, the queen endgame is won for White.

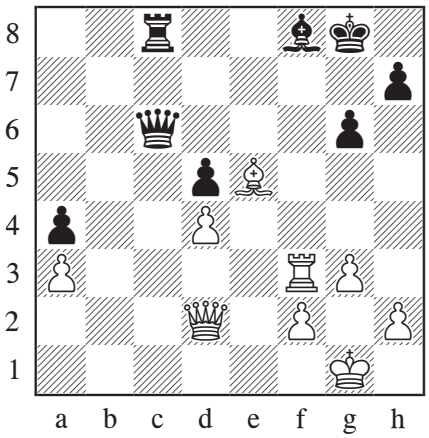
36...♕e6 37.♗e5

How the position has changed in a few moves! It is completely obvious by now that White possesses both a pawn and the initiative. Black is constantly compelled to fend off dangerous threats.

37...♕c6 38.♕a5 ♖a8

Avoiding the small trap 38...♗xa3? 39.♖xa3 ♕c1† 40.♔g2 ♕xa3 41.♕xd5† ♔f8 42.♗d6†.

39.♕d2 ♖c8



40.♔g2 ♕d7 41.h4

The wing pawn too joins in the attack. Its assignment is to batter the black king's position still further. After prolonged thought my opponent sealed the move 41...♕g4, but the following morning he resigned without resuming the game. The continuation could have been, for example, 42.♕a5 ♕d7 43.♖f6, after which the activity of White's pieces would guarantee at least the win of a second pawn.

1–0

The reader going through this game will not discover a boundless multitude of long variations in it – the play had to proceed from general positional considerations. I had played very few games of this type before. For that very reason, I regard the nineteenth game as my best creative achievement of the match.

French Immodesty

Game 17

Robert Fischer – Mikhail Tal

Leipzig Olympiad 1960, *French Defence (C18)*

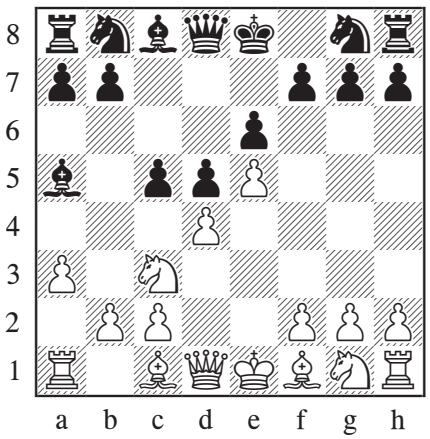
1.e4 e6!

What immodesty! Not a single annotator, even the most subjective, has ever given this move an exclamation mark before. In justification I can only say that if the move does deserve approval, the present writer is not being as presumptuous as all that. He claims only half the exclamation mark for himself, awarding the other half to Alexander Koblencs – seeing that the idea of using the French Defence came to us during our preparation for the game. This opening had hardly ever featured in my own practice, and the choice of variation proved to be a surprise for Fischer. He had only very rarely played positions of a similar type, and an examination of his games showed that in unfamiliar positions the American Champion feels much less confident.

In fairness I have to admit that although at home I had thought of playing the French, it took me about ten minutes at the board to make up my mind to push the pawn to e6.

2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♗a5

A variation that had "risen from the dead" shortly before the present game. The 9th game of the Smyslov – Botvinnik match as long ago as 1954, and also the game Unzicker – Botvinnik in the Amsterdam Olympiad of that year, had given rise to the firm opinion that the 5...♗a5 system was unplayable for Black. More than five years passed, and then, in a 1960 issue of *Shakhmatny Bulletin,* an interesting article by International Master Konstantinopolsky appeared, dealing with some new plans that had been discovered for Black in this variation. I remember that before the first game of my match with Botvinnik, Koblencs and I devoted a fair amount of time to analysing these lines, but we weren't then able to test them – Botvinnik did not employ the system in question.



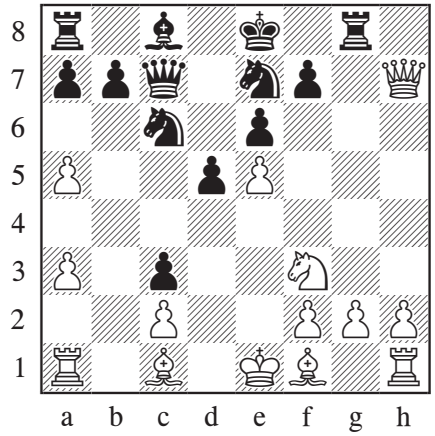
6.b4 cxd4 7.♕g4 ♘e7 8.bxa5 dxc3 9.♕xg7 ♖g8 10.♕xh7 ♘bc6!

Improvement number one. Botvinnik played the more passive 10...♘d7 against Smyslov, and after 11.♘f3 ♘f8 12.♕d3 ♕xa5 13.♗g5! he quite quickly found himself in a difficult situation.

11.♘f3

Konstantinopolsky in his article analyses 11.f4. White rejected that move on the grounds that it "bolsters the centre but shuts in the queen's bishop and weakens the dark squares" (quoted from Fischer's annotations).

11...♕c7



12.♗b5

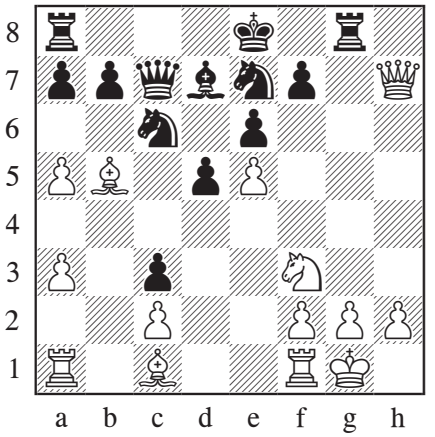
Another possibility is 12.♗f4 as in Unzicker – Dückstein, Zurich 1959, which continued 12...♗d7 13.♗e2 0–0–0 14.♕d3 ♕xa5 15.0–0 ♖g4 16.♗g3.

In making the move in the game, Fischer reckoned that 12...♖xg2 would not be good for Black in view of 13.♔f1! ♖g8 14.♖g1 with a strong attack. But when sacrificing my kingside I had not envisaged accepting a mutual favour, so I made the simple reply.

12...♗d7

Black is now attacking not only the g2-pawn – which this time he seriously wants to capture – but also the pawn on e5, an attractive prize. After a long think, Fischer decided to give up his centre pawn, correctly concluding that 13.♗xc6? ♗xc6 14.0–0 d4! 15.♘g5 ♕xe5 16.♕xf7† ♔d7 would favour Black.

13.0–0



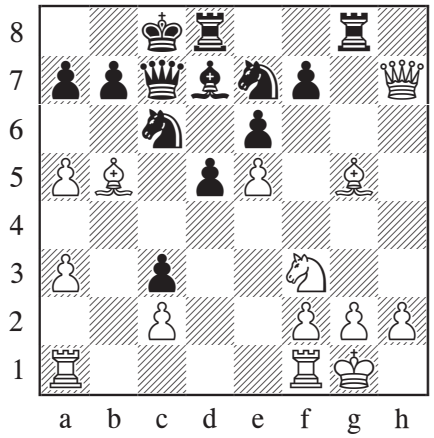
13...0–0–0

The most critical moment in the game. At this point I spent around 40 minutes assessing the position that would arise from 13...♘xe5 14.♘xe5 ♕xe5 15.♗xd7† ♔xd7 16.♕d3!. At first sight it looks very pleasant for Black. He has good chances either in the middlegame (with his open files on the kingside) or in the endgame, thanks to the far advanced pawn on c3. But over the board I couldn't find a way to improve this position noticeably, while the open b-file gives White significant counter-chances. For example: 16...♖ac8 17.♖b1 ♔c7 18.♖b5! ♔b8 19.♗e3 and White activates his forces. Black has great difficulty setting his central pawn mass in motion. I therefore rejected 13...♘xe5, preferring the sharp continuation in the game.

14.♗g5!

Now some mind-bending complications arise, culminating in perpetual check. White could also continue 14.♗xc6, against which I was going to go all out with 14...♗xc6 15.♕xf7 d4, leading to very sharp play. In his annotations to the game, Fischer takes this line further: 16.♕xe6† ♗d7 17.♕xe7 ♖xg2† 18.♔xg2 ♗h3† 19.♔xh3 ♕xe7 20.♗g5, and he considers that White should soon win. Without disputing this specific variation, I would remark for the umpteenth time that

analysis and over-the-board play are, as they put it in Odessa, "two big differences".



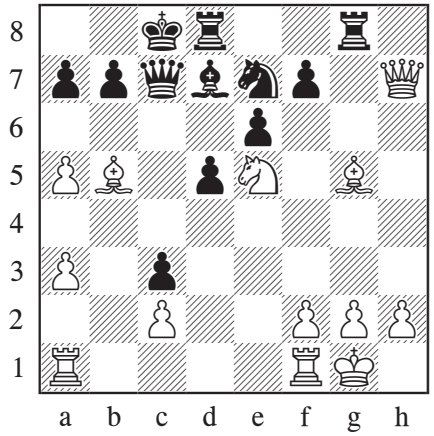
14...♘xe5!

If Black didn't have this possibility available, his position would be unenviable. The players must now instantly gear themselves to the calculation of intricate variations.

15.♘xe5!

Of course not 15.♗xe7 ♘xf3† 16.♔h1 ♖h8, winning for Black.

In the event of 15.♗xd7†, Black would have the choice between 15...♔xd7 and 15...♖xd7 16.♘xe5 ♕xe5 17.♗xe7 ♖h8 18.♖ae1 ♖xh7 19.♖xe5 ♖xe7 with the better chances in the ending.



15...♗xb5!

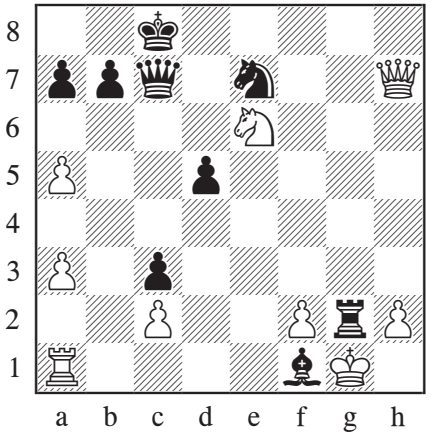
If Black tries 15...♕xe5 by analogy with the line in the last note, this leads to some advantage for White after: 16.♗xe7 ♖h8 (or 16...♗xb5 17.♗xd8 ♖h8 18.♖ae1 ♕xe1 19.♖xe1 ♖xh7 20.♗f6) 17.♖fe1! (not 17.♖ae1 ♕b8!) 17...♕xe1† 18.♖xe1 ♖xh7 19.♗xd8 ♔xd8 20.♗xd7 ♔xd7 21.♖e3 d4 22.♖e4

16.♘xf7 ♗xf1

A curious variation could arise in the case of: 16...♖df8 17.♗h6 (17.♖fb1 ♗c6 18.♘d6† ♕xd6 19.♕xe7 gives a roughly equal game) 17...♗xf1 18.♗xf8 ♗xg2 19.♘d6†! ♕xd6 20.♗xe7

Instead of the mistaken 18...♗xg2? which loses, Black should play 18...♖xg2† 19.♔h1 ♕f4, forcing a draw by reason of 20.♖xf1 ♖g1†!.

17.♘xd8 ♖xg5 18.♘xe6 ♖xg2†



19.♔h1!

The saving move; 19.♔xf1? ♖xh2! 20.♕f7 ♖h1† would give Black a winning attack.

19...♕e5

When beginning the combination with 14...♘xe5, I imagined that at this point, apart from 19...♕e5, the sharper 19...♕c4 20.♕xe7 ♖g8 would be playable. But on looking more deeply into the position, I realized that after

21.♘f4 d4 (if 21...♕xf4?, then 22.♕e6† ♔c7 23.♕xg8) 22.♕e4! there would be no way for the bishop stuck on f1 to come into play, while White for his part could gradually work up a dangerous attack.

It remains to add that in place of 20...♖g8?! Black can force a draw with 20...♖g1†! 21.♔xg1 ♕g4† 22.♔xf1 ♕c4†, giving perpetual check by 23.♔g2 ♕g4† or 23.♔e1 ♕e4† 24.♔f1 ♕h1†.

20.♖xf1 ♕xe6 21.♔xg2 ♕g4†
½–½