

Obsession
A Chess Biography of Vsevolod Rauzer

Alexander Konstantinopolsky

Obsession: A Chess Biography of Vsevolod Rauzer

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A note from the publishers

The author Alexander Konstantinopolsky died in 1990 before he was able to publish this book. Thanks to the efforts of his son, Mark Konstantinopolsky, it was eventually published in Russian in 2022, and now in 2023 it is published in English.

The articles by Alexander Konstantinopolsky, Mikhail Yudovich/Fedor Fogelevich, Efim Lazarev and Mikhail Botvinnik were included in the author's original manuscript.

International Master Grigory Bogdanovich updated the games analysis using modern chess engines.

The four games included in the Additional Games section (no. 75-78) were not part of the author's book. They were provided separately by Sergey Voronkov and Vlad Novikov from their own research efforts, for which we thank them. They are analyzed by Rauzer with updates by Grigory Bogdanovich. Game 4 against Zhuk was included in the original book without Rauzer's annotations. Thanks to the efforts of Sergey Voronkov and Vlad Novikov we have restored them.

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Vsevolod Alfredovich Rauzer

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Vsevolod Rauzer as I Knew Him

Alexander Konstantinopolsky

(This article was first published in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* nos. 7-9, 1989)

Alexander Tvardovsky once wrote the following lines of poetry:

*Of the things I know better than anyone in the world,
I would like to speak – and in my own manner.*

It was this desire that grabbed hold of me when the *Shakhmaty v SSSR* editors asked me to share my memories of the prominent master and theoretician Vsevolod Alfredovich Rauzer (1908–1941).¹

* * *

Kiev of the late 1920s, the city of my chess youth. The Moscow International Tournament caused an explosion of interest in chess among both young and old. We played in very modest conditions, usually in a room of some club or other. We organized competitions by ourselves, overseen by a committee of two or three people. They arranged the equipment and acted as arbiters – of course, *pro bono*, on a voluntary basis. Huge team matches, on 100–200 boards, were becoming fashionable – for instance, Trade Unions vs. University Students or Red Army vs. Education Workers. Friendships emerged there, the spirit

of collectivism was nurtured, this was a school of mastery. So many analyses, debates, discoveries and refutations were born there!

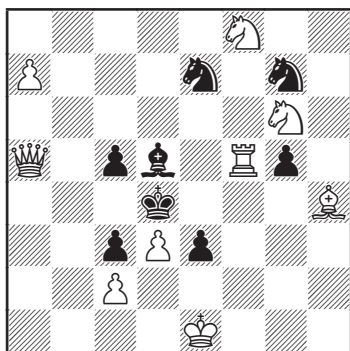
Chess clocks were a rarity. In the days of big blitz tournaments, the clocks were often replaced by the Kiev fan favorite (chess player, checkers player, and giveaway checkers champion) Vasily Grigorievich Sherminsky. He acted as a timekeeper. As he counted loudly, “One, two, three, four, five, six, six, six!” you had to make a move, otherwise you lost on time. Sherminsky announced the results and the pairings for the next rounds. There were never any incidents.

¹ Actually, May 1942 is given in the martyrology of victims of the Siege of Leningrad as Rauzer’s month and year of death, and more precise information is unavailable (see the article by Alexander Kentler “Poor Rauzer” dated 20 April 2020 on <https://e3e5.com/article.php?id=1797>), though 1941 is given in some other secondary sources. According to the official housing records that Kentler found, he died in 1942 (the month was not provided). So it is uncertain whether he died in 1941 or 1942 but 1942 seems more likely. According to the same records his mother died on 29 July 1942.

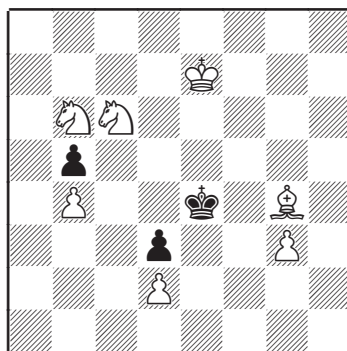
Our friendship with Vsevolod Rauzer blossomed during these old times. From his stories, I learned that he came to Kiev in 1924. Before that, he lived in Rostov-on-Don, and even earlier, in Kislovodsk. I didn't think to ask him where he was born.²

"Since I was first introduced to chess in 1920," Rauzer would recall 16 years later, "and up until now, I've been working on chess on my own. My first book was an almost unreadable Dufresne handbook; in addition, I copied all chess columns I found in the *Niva* magazine by hand."

The chess column in *Izvestia* first appeared on 29th October 1922. On 17th December that year, Grigoriev, the column editor who had a knack for discovering and encouraging young talents, published the 14-year-old Rauzer's chess problem. It showed that the young self-taught player had already mastered the basics of chess composition.



Mate in 2



Mate in 3

1. ♖d8! The a7 pawn is necessary to eliminate a dual: 1. ♖a4+ c4 2. ♖a7#.

*This problem has a tiny imprecision in that after 1...g4 white has two ways to mate the black king, but in fairness to the 14-year-old Rauzer 1...g4 is not the main black reply, as it's not an attempted defense and it would be cooperative.*³

N. Grigoriev also publicized Rauzer's first notable practical success in his column on 26th April 1924: "Rostov-on-Don. The city-level competition ended with a brilliant victory of the 15 year-old V. A. Rauzer, who won all 7 games out of 7(!)."

I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here, but on 14th February 1925, N. Grigoriev published another problem by Rauzer – already a Kiev resident – with praise for the author: "The problem is not difficult, but elegant."

² According to the housing records, both Rauzer and his mother were born in Kiev (*ibid.*).

³ Comments in italics, both here and below, were added by Grigory Bogdanovich

1. ♖a8! ♔d5 2. ♙f5.

Still, problem composition was only a small detail in Rauzer's chess biography (as well as mine). Later, he would characterize his play in that period as follows: "I used to like and still like positional play. My first chess tastes, before I earned 1st category, can be stated thus: 'capture some pawns at the very least, hold on to them, defend and convert.' The first examples I used to hone my style were some games by Lasker, and later by Tarrasch... Tarrasch amazed me with his logic, the clarity of his positions. Still, until 1933, I did not have any concrete practical outlook on the issues of chess struggle."

* * *

Rauzer was a peer of mine, only slightly more than a year older. Still, he had a reputation as the most talented, knowledgeable and authoritative player among the young Kiev guys. I can definitely say that, in the period of 1926–1930, I was an attentive and loyal pupil of his.

Neither I nor Vova (or Ruzia), as friends used to call Rauzer, liked blitz too much, preferring friendly games, where we tested the craziest variations.

Rauzer's flat became a meeting place for the curious fans of chess analysis. He lived in the city center, on Engels Street (formerly Lyuteranskaya [*the historical name*

of Lyuteranskaya Street was restored in 1992]). We would stay up late. Often, the only signal for us finally to leave was a voice from behind the curtain hung across the room, belonging to Rauzer's mother, Varvara Grigorievna, "Vova, it's time to stop the thumping!"

Chess immediately became Rauzer's calling and destiny. You could describe him with a poet's words, "He obeyed only one thought, one, but fiery passion."⁴ And, alas, he could say about himself, "I haven't saved up a single ruble with my lines."⁵ Only a few people could really earn a living with chess back then. Rauzer, impractical and maladjusted to life, most certainly could not.

He worked as a courier in the city's financial department. "I found Botvinnik in Kiev!" he joked once. It turned out that one of the carters to whom he delivered tax notices bore that glorious chess surname.

What features were characteristic for Rauzer as a person? Directness. Honesty. Integrity. A heightened sense of his own dignity. I remember one telling incident. During a Kiev championship, Rauzer turned up 5 or 10 minutes late to his game. As he entered, he saw that his clock had already been started, but there

⁴ A quote from Mikhail Lermontov's *The Novice*. – Translator

⁵ A quote from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *Out Loud*. – Translator

The Opening Creations of Vsevolod Rauzer

*Mikhail Yudovich and Fedor Foglevich*¹²

Opening theory in the USSR has developed with exceptional depth and precision. The analyses of Soviet theoreticians are at the center of attention of the world's chess press. The world's greatest theoreticians – Alekhine, world champion M. Euwe and others – widely use rich opening ideas that were introduced to chess theory by Soviet masters. Our analysts, especially the young ones, boldly create new ways of development, refuting long-established chess templates. Creative initiative, the will to win, boldness and precision – this is what characterizes the work of our young masters.

The leading position in modern theoretical development belongs to the Leningrad player V. A. Rauzer. The best Soviet masters play the openings very carefully and even with some degree of fear when they face Rauzer at the board, because it's

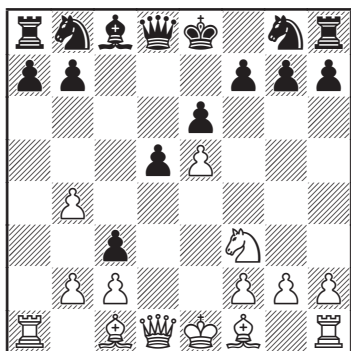
impossible to know how deeply and up to which move their dangerous adversary has developed some new opening variation. In his analysis, Rauzer goes his own way, he organically eschews the templates. The brilliant analytical talent of the young Soviet theoretician has managed to resurrect quite a few opening problems that were relegated to the archives. Rauzer's tremendous advantage as a theoretician is that he manages to find entire coherent development systems in almost every modern opening, rather than just individual pretty and strong moves.

Since the game Lasker – Maroczy (New York 1924), the line 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 cxd4 has been considered better for black because of 6.axb4 dxc3 7.bxc3 ♔c7! with strong pressure along the c-file. Rauzer himself wrote that as he remembered that well-known game, he noticed the lack of logic behind

¹² The journal of publication and date of this article are unknown, but clearly in the period 1935 to 1937, as it refers to Euwe as being the world champion at the time. Foglevich was born in 1909. He is mentioned by Vasily Smyslov as head of the Zamoskvorechye chess club in Moscow in the mid-1930s (see *Smyslov on the Couch* by Genna Sosonko, Elk and Ruby, 2018, p. 196), while the Russian-language *Jewish Chess Encyclopedia* (Russian Chess House, 2016, p. 267) provides a brief tournament biography. He went missing in action while serving in the Soviet armed forces in September 1941 during World War II (see records of the Central Archive of the Russian Defense Ministry <https://poisk.re/loss/76329940>).

7.bxc3. Since it's not beneficial for white to hold onto the c3 pawn, why then should he waste tempi on capturing the black pawn?

Rauzer drew very interesting conclusions from this seemingly unimportant detail. As a result, he found the famous continuation 7.♘f3!

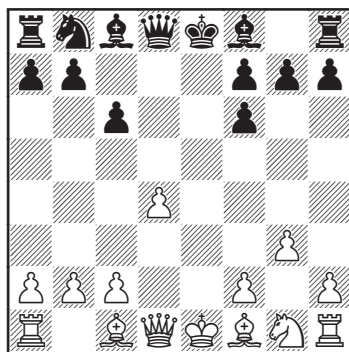


Sacrificing a pawn, but getting a very strong attack. If 7...cxb2 then 8.♙xb2, winning another tempo for development. Tournament practice shows that black's lag in development and weakness of the dark squares are not compensated by the extra pawn. Since 1933, following the game Rauzer – Alatortsev (Soviet Championship), the move 7.♘f3! has become one of the classical lines of the French Defense.

After the game Rauzer – I. Rabinovich (1933 Soviet Championship), the popular variation of the Caro-Kann, 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6+ exf6, was positionally refuted. It seems that black had managed to solve the development problems in the opening

quite well, with the doubled f-pawns protecting the e5 and g5 squares. But here's what Rauzer managed to find in this position:

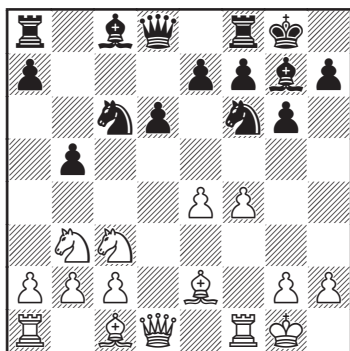
“After 5...exf6, white has got an extra pawn on the queenside, while black's kingside pawns are doubled. Thus, white's plan is as follows: castle short, push the queenside pawns and convert his essentially extra d-pawn. The plan is simple and clear. To implement this plan, it's very important to put the bishop on g2 to support the pawn onslaught, which should go as follows: c4, b4, a4, then c5 and b5 or (instead of c5) d5, depending on circumstances. By the way, the move g2-g3 kills the activity of black's dark-squared bishop along the d6-h2 diagonal, bolstering white's kingside and his king's position. If one carefully considers all the features of the move 6.g3!, it becomes clear that this is the best move in this position.”



The flawless win in the game against Rabinovich brilliantly confirmed the correctness and

concreteness of the intended plan, and the Rauzer system now holds an honorable place in Caro-Kann theory.

In one of the most fashionable lines of the Sicilian Defense that has given white a number of brilliant victories in international tournaments of the last few years, Rauzer, after 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 d6 6.♙e2 g6 7.0-0 ♙g7 8.♘b3 0-0 9.f4, proposed a bold and original idea based on the correct evaluation of the occurring position: 9...b5!



Black, who threatens b4 and ♘xe4, gets excellent play in all lines. For instance: 10.♘xb5 ♘xe4 or 10.♙xb5 ♘xe4! 11.♘xe4 (or 11.♙xc6) 11...♙b6+ and ♙xb5 or ♙xc6; or 10.♙f3 (seemingly the best) 10...b4 11.♘d5 ♘xd5 12.exd5 ♘a5 or first 12...♙b6+ 13.♙h1 ♘a5.

“The move 9...b5, based on defending the c6 knight with ♙b6+, exploits all the disadvantages of white’s position.” (Rauzer in *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, No. 11, 1935.)

Of Rauzer’s other numerous findings, a solid system in the same Sicilian Defense especially stands out, after 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 (now black usually plays 2...d6 to avoid the Rauzer system) 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 d6 6.♙g5! This system started a real revolution in the theory of the Sicilian Defense, and theoreticians are still hotly arguing about it.

*No. 73. French Defense***Rauzer – Rovner**

Leningrad (m/2), 1937

*Annotated by V. Rauzer***1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4**

A very fashionable move, which was declared by me in 1933 (to stir more controversy!) a ‘blunder’ that weakens the dark squares. I can attest that I managed to prove my paradoxical statement in important games. From this point of view, this game is theoretically significant. The entire match is theoretically significant, because Rovner and I argued a lot in 1935 over whether a third move in the opening could be considered a mistake, especially such a move as 3...♙b4. In such arguments, we couldn’t agree on anything. Of course, it’s possible that in the next few games black will take his revenge in this line, but I am deeply sure that white will have the last word!

4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♙xc3+

Black tried 5...♙a5 in the fourth game, but unsuccessfully.

6.bxc3 ♖c7

Rovner’s own move, recommended by P. A. Romanovsky. However, black got a very difficult position just ten moves later in that earlier game.¹⁷

7.♔g4

Another good system here is 7.♘f3, then, after preparation, a3-a4 and ♙a3.

7...f5

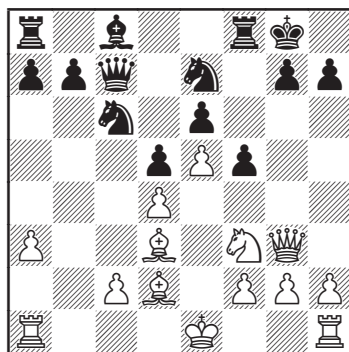
Rovner’s idea is to defend the g7 pawn with a tempo. This, however, weakens the e6 pawn and takes the f5 square away from the black knights.

8.♖g3 cxd4 9.cxd4 ♘e7

9...♖xc2 would have been met with 10.♙d2, threatening 11.♖xg7 and 11.♖c1. For the backward c2 pawn, white would get some tempi and the c-file.

10.♙d2 ♘bc6 11.♘f3

11.♖xg7 ♖g8 and 12...♘xd4 is no good.

11...0-0 12.♙d3

This bishop pair, which is not easy to trade off, ensures white’s kingside initiative. The f5 pawn closes the diagonal for the d3 bishop, but allows white to open the g-file with g2-g4.

12...♙d7

12...♖b6 was stronger. For instance, 13.c3 ♘a5 14.0-0 ♖c7 15.♖ab1 ♘c4 16.♙c1, etc.

¹⁷ Romanovsky recommended it in *Shakhmaty v SSSR* No. 3, 1936. Rovner’s game referred to occurred that same year at the VTsSPS championship.

13.h4 ♖h8

It's dangerous to allow the white pawn to reach h6: white will control all dark squares on the kingside afterwards.

14.h5 h6

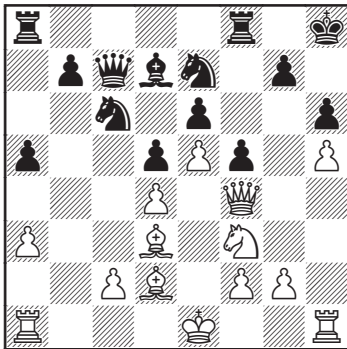
This prophylaxis creates a new weakness on g6.

15.♖f4

Preparing to push the g2 pawn.

15...a5

Black correctly seeks chances on the queenside. 15...♘a5 is met with the unpleasant 16.♙b4. On the other hand, black's pawn charge cuts off his pieces' access to white's queenside.

**16.♘h4?**

After playing all this in three minutes, white misses an important detail: the intended move g2-g4 is impossible as long as the rook remains on a1, because 17.g4 is met with 17...fxg4 18.♖xg4 ♘xe5! 19.dxe5 ♖xe5+ and 20...♖xa1. The correct move was 16.♖b1!, preventing b7-b5 in the meantime.

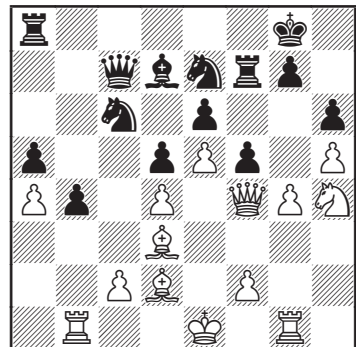
16...b5 17.♖b1

17.♘g6+ ♘xg6 18.hxg6 ♙e8 19.g4 ♙xg6 20.g5 h5 21.♙e2 ♖f7 22.♙xb5 was not bad either. It seems that black's position is so poor that white can afford to choose various continuations and make some inaccuracies.

17...b4 18.a4 ♖g8

Black decides that his king should escape to the queenside. This is, of course, a desperate measure, but the possible queenside counter-attack also came too late. For instance: 18...♘a7 19.g4 fxg4 20.♖xg4 ♙xa4 21.♘g6+ ♘xg6 22.♖xg6 ♖f5 23.♖xe6 etc.

It's hard to improve this line for black, but white's attack can be made significantly better, for instance, with 22.hxg6, and the bishop sacrifice on h6 quickly decides matters.

19.♖g1 ♖f7 20.g4**20...♖f8**

It wasn't too late for black to put up some resistance with 20...fxg4 21.♖xg4 ♘f5. After the actual move, however, the game is over.

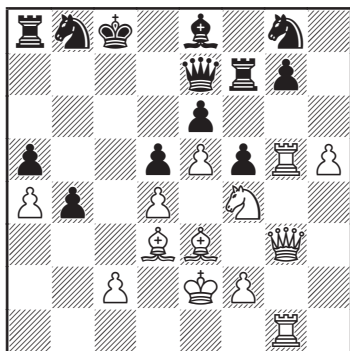
21.g5 hxg5 22.♖xg5 ♘g8

Black's position is so unsightly that it's hard for the commentator to find any acceptable moves for him.

23. ♖g6+ ♔e8 24. ♘h8 ♜e7
25. ♔e2 ♔d8 26. ♜bg1 ♘e8 27. ♞g6
♜f7 28. ♙e3 ♞b8

Both knights are back home!

29. ♜h4 ♔c8 30. ♞f4 ♜e7
31. ♜g3



The diagram is quite amusing: white pieces occupy the best possible positions, while the black pieces are positioned almost as poorly as possible. After 31. ♜g3, black cannot avoid material losses, because 31... ♜a7 is met with 32. ♜g6, and one of the pawns – g7 or e6 – falls.

31... ♙xa4 32. ♜xg7 ♞h6 33. ♜g6
♞g4 34. ♜xe6 ♜f8 35. ♞xd5 ♞d7
36. ♜a1 ♞xe3 37. ♞xe3 b3 38. ♞xb3

This also wins a piece, but prevents the pesky pawn from reaching b2.

38... ♙xb3 39. ♜c6+ ♔b7
40. ♜c7+ ♔b8 41. ♜b1 a4 42. e6

Black resigned.

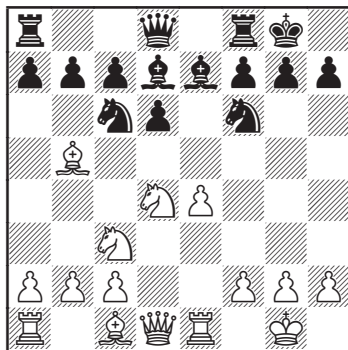
42... f4 is met with 43. ♞xf4, and if 43... ♔xc7 then 44. ♞g6+ ♜d6 45. ♜c1+, winning the queen.

No. 74. Ruy Lopez

Rovner – Rauzer

Leningrad (m/13), 1937

1. e4 e5 2. ♞f3 ♞c6 3. ♙b5 d6
4. d4 ♙d7 5. ♞c3 ♞f6 6. 0-0 ♙e7
7. ♜e1 exd4 8. ♞xd4 0-0



9. ♙xc6

D. Rovner played more solidly in the ninth game of the match in the same line: 9. ♙f1 ♞xd4 10. ♜xd4 ♙c6 11. b4 ♞g4 12. ♙b2 ♙f6 13. ♜d2 ♜e8 14. h3 ♞e5 15. ♜ad1 a6. After 16. a3 ♜b8 17. ♞d5 ♙xd5 18. exd5 a5 19. ♙d4 axb4, the opponents quickly agreed a draw. There's no sense in prolonging the battle further due to full equalization of chances (and probably ambitions!).

Nobody except Rovner could tell why he decided to repeat this line. The attempt was ill-advised and quickly led to a catastrophe.

9... ♞xc6 10. ♙f4 ♜b8 11. ♜b1
♜e8 12. e5? dxe5 13. ♜xe5 ♙d6
14. ♜xe8+ ♜xe8 15. ♜f3

Only this blunder leads to white's