

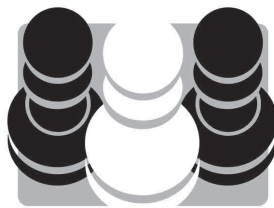
Chess Classics

Soviet Outcast

The Life and Games of Grigory Levenfish

By

Grigory Levenfish



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Contents

Publisher's Foreword	3
Epigraph & Key to Symbols used	6
Translator's Preface	7
1 School and Student Years	9
2 The Master Title, Memorable Encounters	23
The Tournament at Carlsbad	24
St Petersburg 1914	46
3 First Tournaments in the Soviet Republic	53
The All-Russia Olympiad	53
Petrograd Championship	63
2nd USSR Championship	66
3rd USSR Championship	79
4th USSR Championship	82
4 The Years 1925-26	87
1st Moscow International 1925	87
8th USSR Championship	102
9th USSR Championship	109
2nd Moscow International 1935	119
3rd Moscow International 1936	143

5	My Best Achievements	163
	Tournament with the Participation of Fine	163
	10th USSR Championship	165
	The Match versus Botvinnik	177
6	The Pre-War Years	195
	The Training Tournament	196
	11th USSR Championship	199
	The Match versus Alatorstev	201
7	The Great Patriotic War	211
8	Some Games of Recent Years	213
	Translator's Postscript	220
	Appendix – Additional Games	221
	Afterword by Jacob Aagaard – One Hundred Years Later	257
	Tournament and Match Record of Grigory Levenfish	287
	Crosstables from Key Events	289
	Index of Opponents (Levenfish playing White)	294
	Index of Opponents (Levenfish playing Black)	296
	Selected books authored or edited by Levenfish	298
	Name Index	299

Translator's Preface

I first became interested in the story of Grigory Levenfish around 30 years ago, when playing through the games of his 1937 match with Mikhail Botvinnik. Previously, he had been familiar to me only as the co-author, with Vasily Smyslov, of a classic work on rook endgames. However, in 1986, Caissa Books published a small booklet featuring the games of the Levenfish – Botvinnik match, with translations of the contemporary annotations by the players from the magazine *64*. I was of course very familiar with the name of Mikhail Botvinnik, and was aware that by the mid-1930s he was already one of the strongest players in the world, having shared 1st-2nd place in two of the greatest events of those years – the 2nd Moscow International (1935) and Nottingham 1936. Yet here was a man who, in the course of the 13 games of the 1937 match, managed to defeat Botvinnik no fewer than five times. To put this in context, in the Moscow and Nottingham events, as well as in the 3rd Moscow International of 1936 (where he finished 2nd, behind Capablanca) Botvinnik had lost only three times in 51 games.

Information on Levenfish was hard to come by in those distant, pre-internet days. I was limited to what I could glean from Kotov and Yudovich's work, *The Soviet School of Chess*, which featured his magnificent victories v. Kan (9th USSR Championship, Leningrad 1934/35) and Smyslov (17th USSR Championship, 1949). Additional games found in the pages of *Shakhmatnyi Byulleten* and in some older books such as Nimzowitsch's celebrated *My System* helped complete the picture of Levenfish as a player, but said very little about him as a person.

Further information about him had to wait until 2001, and the publication of Genna Sosonko's *Russian Silhouettes*. The closing chapter of that magnificent book is dedicated to Grigory Levenfish, and the picture that emerges from it is of someone who was much more than just a very strong chessplayer. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the Soviet Union, he was for many years essentially an amateur; by profession he was a chemist, specializing in the production of glass. He held senior positions in industry, and it was only when he was effectively forced to give up his work and concentrate on chess that the full extent of his talent was revealed. From Sosonko's portrait it became clear just why, despite winning the Soviet Championship twice in the space of three years and drawing with Botvinnik in the 1937 match – thereby gaining the title of Soviet Grandmaster (only the second player to then hold the title, after Botvinnik himself) – he was not selected to represent the USSR in the great AVRO tournament of 1938. Unfortunately for him, the Soviet chess authorities had already put their faith in Botvinnik, a representative of the post-Revolutionary generation, and someone with impeccable political credentials. Levenfish, in contrast, was seen as one of the old guard, and his entire outlook on life put him at odds with the Soviet system. Thus, he became something of an outcast.

Sosonko's portrait featured extracts from Levenfish's autobiographical work *Izbrannyye Partii i Vospominanie* ('Selected Games and Reminiscences') which was published in the USSR in 1967, some six years after Levenfish's death, and I determined to get hold of a copy of this book, as well as others written by him, such as the tournament book of the 9th USSR Championship. When I discovered Levenfish's memoir had never been published in English, I decided to translate it myself, and the result is *Soviet Outcast*.

In his memoir Levenfish describes in vivid detail the atmosphere of pre- and post-revolutionary Russia, giving first-hand impressions of some of the most famous names in early-twentieth-century chess, such as Lasker, Rubinstein, Alekhine and Capablanca – all of whom were personally known to him. Some of the passages in the book stay long in the memory – descriptions of the hardships endured by players in the first USSR Championship that took place in the difficult years of the Civil War, of idyllic trips to the Caucasus and Crimea, of grim struggles for survival in the winter of 1941, when he nearly died of exposure when travelling across country from the Urals to Kuibyshev. Unlike the short portrait in *Russian Silhouettes*, his autobiography also features example of Levenfish's play; included are his annotations to 79 of his finest games. To these I have added a number of his games from other sources – Soviet periodicals and tournament books – mostly with annotations by Levenfish himself. Additional biographical material has been gained from material published by modern Russian chess historians (notably Aleksandr Kentler on www.e3e5.com). Finally, this book includes a full listing of Levenfish's tournament and match record, and cross-tables from key events in which he participated.

It has long been an ambition of mine to see Levenfish's memoir published in English, to bring the story of this remarkable man to the wider audience that it deserves. I am grateful to Quality Chess for allowing a personal ambition to be fulfilled.

Douglas Griffin
Insch, Aberdeenshire, Scotland
September 2019

Chapter 2

The Master Title, Memorable Encounters

In those years the path to the acquisition of the Master title lay through the Congress of the German Chess Union. The chess life of Germany was excellently organized. Alongside international tournaments for masters, there were also arranged additional ones for amateurs. By winning such a tournament one obtained the Master title. In 1910 the congress was held in Hamburg. First prize in the tournament was taken by the representative of Russia, Rotlewi. In 1911 the same tournament was held in the summer in Cologne, and here too first place was taken by a representative of Russia, Lowtzky. Freiman shared second place.

The attraction of chess seriously told on my study. I was very much ‘in arrears’. The prospect of passing among the ranks of the ‘perpetual students’ was not at all enticing, and I had to very seriously apply myself both in the laboratory and in technical drawing. I could not even dream of going to Cologne. However, fate smiled on me: the resort town of Carlsbad (now Karlovy Vary) intended to hold during July and August – that is, the months of the summer break – a great international tournament of masters. Formally, I did not have the right to take part in it, but the director of the Petersburg Assembly helped out. A letter by P.A. Saburov to the organizer of the tournament, Mr. Tietz, immediately had an effect, and soon there followed an invitation to include me among the participants. Meanwhile a rich family, departing for the summer to the resort town of Tsoppot (now Sopot, in Poland), invited me to be their tutor. At the start of June I was already in Germany. My tutoring work took up some of my time, but in the evenings I was free. The resort of Tsoppot is near to the port city of Danzig (now Gdańsk) and was connected to it by a tram line. In Danzig I tracked down the local chess circle. It was located in one of the rooms of a restaurant. The strongest chessplayer of the circle was considered to be the naval officer von Hennig, a commander of the personal yacht of Kaiser Wilhelm. With Hennig I played a series of training games. I needed an opponent of heavyweight positional style, but unfortunately Hennig was first and foremost a tactician. The games took a very lively course, but were hardly beneficial to me.

The way to Carlsbad passed through Berlin. Leaving my suitcase at the station, I decided to visit the café Kernau, one of the centres of chess life of the German capital. I did not have time to enter

the chess room, since I was approached by a very smart gentleman of small height, and between us there took place the following dialogue:

“Would you not like to play a game of chess?”

“Please.”

“Perhaps we could play blitz?”

“Agreed.”

“Only for a mark per game.”

“Agreed.”

“The account will be settled after every five games.”

For blitz games, lasting two-three minutes, these stakes were high. But in Petersburg I was considered one of the best blitz players and I decided to test my strength against this brisk gentleman.

We played without clocks. My opponent suggested a lightning tempo, in which moves were made with both hands. I replied with the same speed and won all five games. The moment of reckoning had arrived, but it turned out that my opponent did not have five marks. Then he asked me:

“What is your surname?”

I stated my name.

“So you will play in the international tournament. Why did you not say so earlier?”

“You did not ask.”

My opponent began to fuss, and soon appeared with the final draft of some chess book or other.

“This is for you, instead of the five marks.”

I did not object. It turned out that he was the author of this pulp literature, and I learned that his name was Bernhard Kagan.

During the First World War, Kagan became rich. Then he founded a large chess publishing house and brought out some decent magazines. In those difficult years for Germany, when famine raged, Kagan financed tournaments and matches and was of great help to chess masters, being mindful of the difficult times that they faced.

The Tournament in Carlsbad

Mr. Tietz very much liked tournaments with a large number of players. In the first Carlsbad tournament he invited 21 masters, in the second – 26! Apart from Lasker and Tarrasch, all of the strongest chessplayers of the world were present. In order to avoid the accumulation of adjourned games, play continued from nine in the morning until one in the afternoon, and after a two-hour break for lunch, from three until seven in the evening. Thus, an eight-hour load, difficult even for experienced masters. In the two Petersburg tournaments in which I had participated, we had played in the evening three to four times per week; I was completely unprepared for such a chess marathon and in the afternoon hours ‘buried’ not a few points. On the other hand, play took place in the great hall*, where the clean air and complete silence eased the tension of the struggle. One could count the number of spectators on one’s fingers.

[**Translator’s note:* The event was held at the Imperial Bath-house Hotel (the *Kurbhaus*).]

In this tournament, for the first time Russia was represented by a large group of masters: Alapin, Alekhine, Duz-Khotimirsky, Nimzowitsch, A. Rabinovich, Rotlewi, Rubinstein and Salwe. Alapin I

was seeing for the first time; with the remainder I was familiar from the time of the first St Petersburg tournament of 1909. It was in the very second round that I was to meet Alapin. He was rather heavy-set, but still vigorous and cheerful, with lively dark eyes. He was then 54 years old. He lived in Berlin more than he did in Petersburg.

Alapin's serious chess achievement relates to the year 1879, when in the St Petersburg tournament he shared first place with Chigorin. In the subsequent match he suffered defeat. Alapin's further successes in tournaments and matches were mediocre, but he gained recognition as a first-class analyst. His studies of the Evans Gambit, the French Defence and the Four Knights' Game were published world-wide. Alapin's faith in the power of chess analysis sometimes led to curiosities. For example, Alapin proposed to Spielmann to play a match with the condition that each would have the right during play to make use of a pocket chess set for analysis. Spielmann agreed and, though he never once touched the pocket set, won the match. At the Dominik café and in the Chess Assembly I more than once heard talk of how Alapin, having invited a familiar chessplayer to his home, had locked the door with a key and the joint analysis had continued... for three days. A maid brought meals from the restaurant, but the guest was not released. The Englishman Burn invited Alapin to visit him after the Carlsbad tournament. Burn's invitation was tempting enough, but Alapin all the same declined. "Burn, it is said, has an ancient castle in Scotland, with a drawbridge. We will be carried away by Burn's analyses, and I will never get out."

When I played against Alapin, after each move he wrote something on his scoresheet. After the game I asked him what he had written. It turned out that Alapin had been counting the number of tempos spent on the development of his pieces. What benefit he reckoned on extracting from

this counting, I do not know. In the game against Alekhine he had an advantage of four tempos, but at just that moment Alekhine carried out a decisive combination.

In Carlsbad our first acquaintance took place, but the following year at Vilna we got to know each other more closely and analysed a lot together.

I present several games.

GAME 4

Simon Alapin – Grigory Levenfish

Carlsbad 1911

1.c4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.♙f4

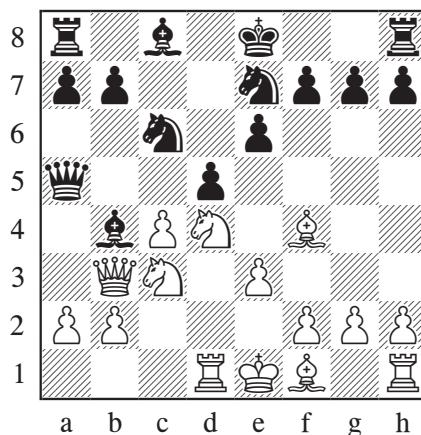
If White does not want to play the Schlechter Attack (5.cxd5) then it is better for him to choose 5.e3.

5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♙b4 7.e3 ♘ge7

Thus continued the game Em. Lasker – Freiman from the St Petersburg tournament.

8.♗b3 ♗a5 9.♙d1

White makes an automatic developing move. On his scoresheet Alapin counted the number of tempos. At the present moment he has an advantage of two tempos, but a bad game. 9.♙c1 ought to be played.



9...♙d7!

With the threat of 10...♜xd4 and 11...♙a4.

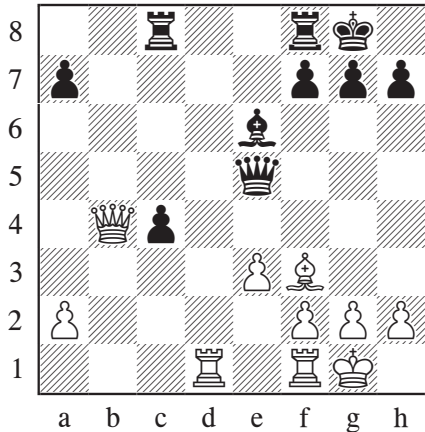
10.♜c2 ♙xc3† 11.bxc3 0–0 12.♙e2 e5

Now it is clear why White's 5th move is not good.

13.♙g3 ♙e6 14.0–0 ♞ac8

With the threat of 15...dxc4 and 16...♜d4. Defending against it, White carries out an exchanging combination, which unexpectedly leads to a strategically lost position.

15.♜b4 dxc4 16.♜xc6 ♜xc6 17.♞xb7 ♞xc3
18.♙f3 ♜b4 19.♙xe5 ♞xe5 20.♞xb4



20...c3

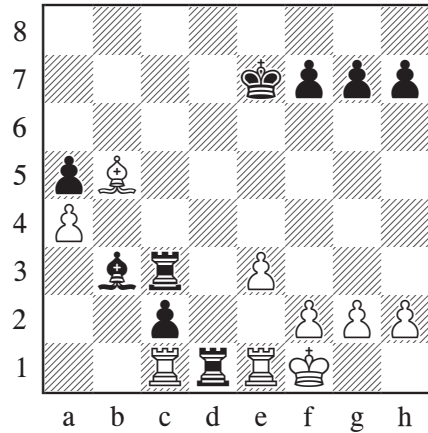
The passed pawn rapidly decides the game.

21.♞a3 c2 22.♞c1 ♞c5!

Transposition to an endgame is the shortest path to victory.

23.♞b2 ♞c3 24.♞xc3 ♞xc3 25.a4 a5 26.♙e2
♙b3 27.♙b5 ♞d8 28.♞fe1 ♞d2 29.♜f1 ♜f8
30.♞e2 ♞d1† 31.♞e1 ♜e7

The king is going a long way – to b2. The remainder is simple.



32.♜e2 ♜d6 33.♞xd1† cxd1=♞† 34.♞xd1†
♙xd1† 35.♜xd1 ♜c5 36.h4 ♞a3 37.g4 ♞a2

White resigned at the 53rd move.

...0–1

After the 12th round I had gathered 6 points – 50 per cent. Quantitatively, this was not a bad result, but it was achieved at the expense of relatively weak opponents, while the 'old hands' still lay ahead. I suffered a failure in the game against Chajes. Having a healthy extra pawn, in time trouble I lost the exchange at the 30th move. But on the other hand, in the following game I had no basis to reproach myself for anything.

GAME 5

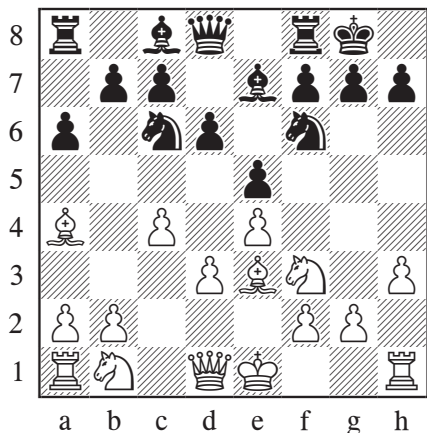
Oldrich Duras – Grigory Levenfish

Carlsbad 1911

1.e4 e5 2.♜f3 ♜c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♜f6
5.d3 d6 6.c4

Duras's celebrated continuation. I vaguely remembered that Black continues ...g6 and ...♙g7, but I wanted to get away as quickly as possible from the theoretical designs of my opponent.

6...♙e7 7.h3 0–0 8.♙e3



8...d5!

The beginning of an interesting idea. 9. dxe5 will not do in view of 9... dxe5 10. wxh5 dx3†.

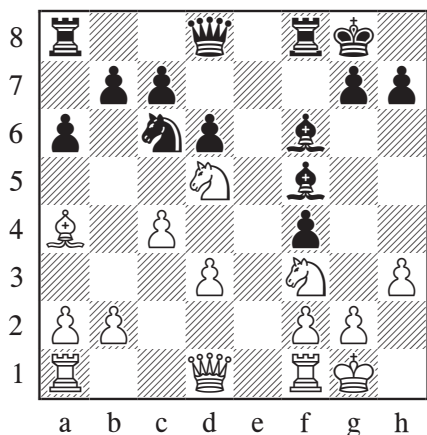
9. d3 f5

A strong move. Unfavourable for White is the continuation 10. exf5 xf5 11. g4 g6, and White cannot take the knight at h5 in view of 12... xh5.

10. d5 d4!

A positional sacrifice of a pawn.

11. xf4 exf4 12. exf5 xf5 13.0-0 g6!



The white king has taken cover, while the pawn at f4 is hanging. To defend it by means

of 13... g6 led after 14. d2 to the loss of the initiative. Black has thought up a more aggressive plan.

14. dxf4 g5!

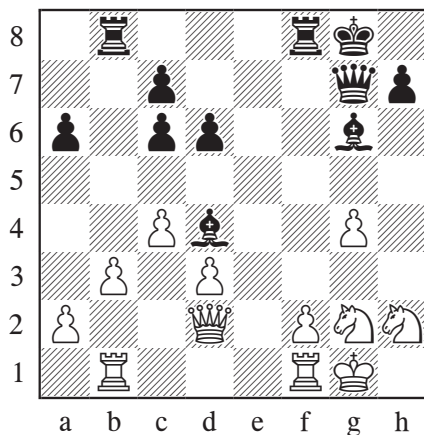
Naturally, not 14... xb2 on account of 15. b1 and then 16. xb7.

15. d5 g4 16. hxg4 xg4

The pin is very unpleasant, and White is obliged to immediately liquidate it.

17. e3 h5 18. g4 g6 19. xc6 bxc6 20. b1 d7 21. d2 h2 22. d4 d2 23. g2 ab8 24. b3

The pawn sacrifice has completely justified itself. Black has mastery of the whole board, and the pawn cover of the white king is weakened.



24... e3 25. c2 h8 26. d4

In order to rid himself of one of the bishops.

26... e5 27. f3

This weakening was all the same impossible to avoid.

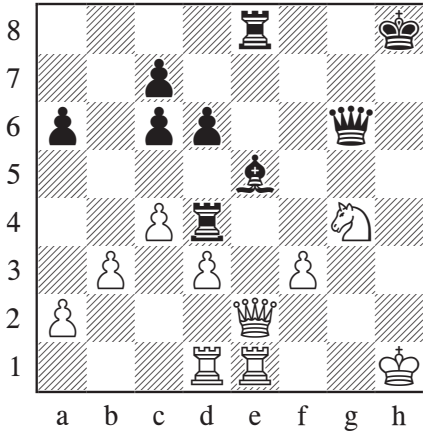
27... f4 28. bd1 bf8 29. g2 d4 30. d6† xg6 31. e2 e8 32. fe1 h5!

The final attack.

33. ♖h1 hxg4

Intending on 34.fxg4 to reply 34...♞e7 with the threat of 35...♞h7.

34. ♘xg4



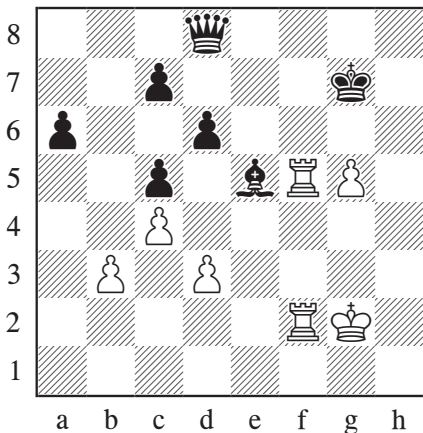
34...♞xg4! 35.fxg4 ♞h6†

White now loses the queen or is mated.

36. ♖g1 ♠d4† 37. ♖g2 ♞xe2† 38. ♞xe2 ♞f4

White's game is hopeless, but Duras draws matters out for a long time.

39. ♞h1† ♖g7 40. ♞h3 ♠e5 41. ♞e3 ♞g5
42. ♞h3 c5 43. a3 ♠b2 44. ♞e4 ♠xa3 45. ♞f5
♞d8 46. ♞ef4 ♠b2 47. g5 ♠e5 48. ♞f2



48...♞b8 49. ♞5f3 ♠d4 50. ♞e2 ♞xb3
51. ♞e7† ♖g6 52. ♞e6† ♖xg5 53. ♞e4 ♠f6
54. ♖h3 ♞c3 55. ♞g4† ♖h5 56. ♞f5† ♖h6
57. ♞g3 ♠e5 58. ♞gf3 ♞d2 59. ♖h4 ♖g6
60. ♞f2 ♞h6† 61. ♖g4 a5 62. ♞f1 a4 63. ♞1f3
a3 64. d4 a2
0-1

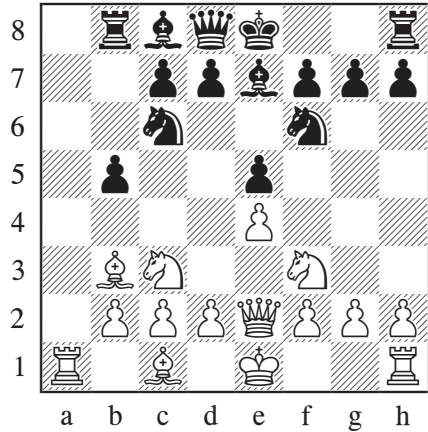
After this victory I had 7½ points. In order to obtain the title of Master, according to the statutes of the German Chess Union, it was necessary to gather one third of all the available points in the tournament, that is, 8½ points. Therefore I played the following game with great élan.

GAME 6

Grigory Levenfish – Paul Leonhardt

Carlsbad 1911

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♠b5 a6 4. ♠a4 ♘f6
5. ♞e2 b5 6. ♠b3 ♠e7 7. a4 ♞b8 8. axb5 axb5
9. ♘c3



9...0-0

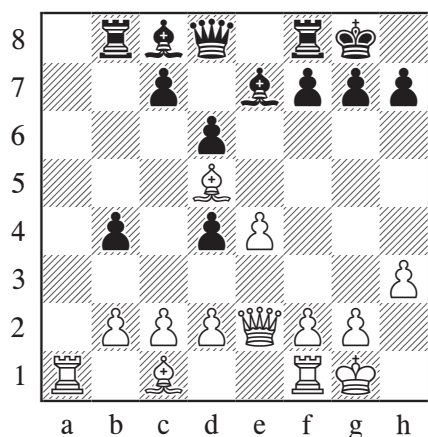
The correct reply. On 10. ♘xb5 there follows 10...d5 with an attack.

10.0–0 d6 11.h3 b4 12.♘d5 ♗xd5

Better is 12...♙d7, after which White has to play 13.d3, and the queen does not get to the queen's flank.

13.♙xd5 ♗d4

Evidently, this move already represents a decisive mistake. The paradoxical continuation 13...♙c7, and on 14.♙c4 – 14...♗d8 – rids Black of the opening difficulties.

14.♗xd4 exd4**15.♙c4! c5**

Forced. On 15...♙f6 there follows 16.♖a7 winning a pawn.

16.♖a7 ♙d7

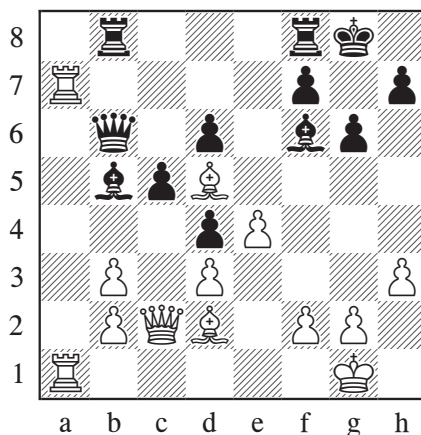
With the threat of 18...♙b5.

17.d3 b3

This freeing attempt is provoked by the absence of useful moves, whereas White threatens to increase the pressure with 18.♙f4 and 19.e5.

18.cxb3 ♙b5 19.♙c2 ♙f6 20.♙d2 ♙b6

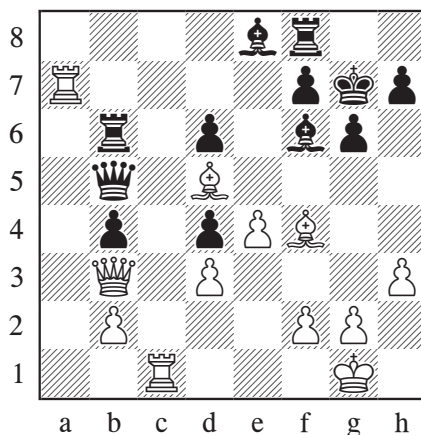
The black pieces have seemingly escaped to freedom. But not for long.

21.♖fa1 g6**22.b4!**

A counter-sacrifice of a pawn. The black pieces will soon be thrown back.

22...cxb4 23.♙b3 ♙e8 24.♖7a6! ♙c5 25.♖c1 ♙b5 26.♖a7 ♗g7

There was threatened 27.♖cc7, to which Black now replies 27...♙d8!

27.♙f4 ♖b6**28.g4!**

Taking away the h5-square from the queen, and deciding the game.

28...♙d8 29.♙c4 ♙c6 30.♙xf7 ♙xc1† 31.♙xc1 ♙xf7 32.♙h6†! ♗g8 33.♙a4 ♙e8

Or 33...♖e8 34.♚d7 ♘e7 35.♗a8! ♗xa8
36.♚xe7.

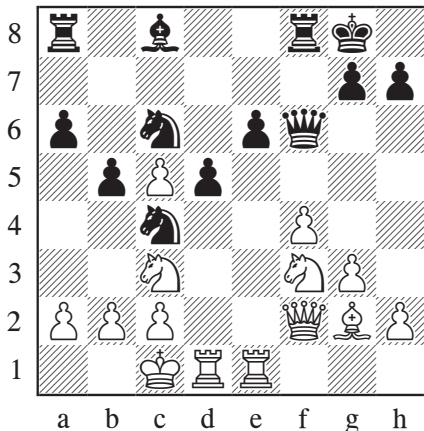
34.♗g7† ♔h8 35.♚a7
1–0

Thus, I became a Master.

From my Petersburg friends I received congratulatory telegrams. At this point I occupied seventh place in the tournament table. But, as often happens, after achieving the intended goal, a reaction set in. In addition, I began to show fatigue, and I conducted the finish of the tournament languidly. Rubinstein and Nimzowitsch employed against me new opening systems that had been worked out in detail. I defended tenaciously, but at critical moments did not find the correct continuations. I present the conclusions of these games.

Akiba Rubinstein – Grigory Levenfish

Carlsbad 1911

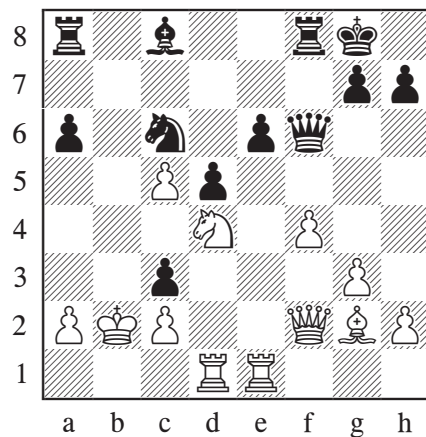


The position in the diagram arose after White's 16th move. The dark squares in the centre are at the mercy of White, and the e6-pawn is weak. Black's only counter-chance consists in an attack on the white king. There followed:

16...♗xb2?

Haste, which immediately ruins Black's game. It was not difficult to understand that Black expends his last reserves without obtaining an attack. Meanwhile, by continuing 16...b4! 17.♗a4 ♘d7, Black would prevent the important manoeuvre ♗d4 and create the threat of ...♗6a5. If 18.c3, then 18...bxc3 19.♗xc3 ♗ab8, and Black's attack is irresistible.

17.♗xb2 b4 18.♗d4! bxc3†



19.♗a1!

Now White's king is in safety, and Black's position comes apart at the seams.

19...♗xd4

There was the threat of 20.♗xe6 ♘xe6 21.♗xe6.

20.♗xd4 ♗b8 21.♗e3 g5

A desperate attempt to provoke complications.

22.♗xc3 gxf4 23.gxf4 ♘d7

23...♗xf4 will not do on account of 24.♗g3†.

24.c6 ♗xd4 25.♗xd4 ♘e8 26.♘h3 ♗f6 27.c7
♗c8 28.♗xd5 ♗xc7 29.♘xe6†

1–0

The sorry result of an incorrect assessment of the position.