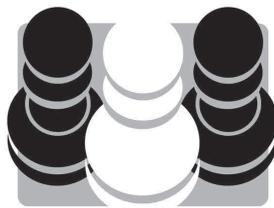


Sicilian Warfare

By

Ilya Smirin



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Preface

The two most exciting openings in chess are beyond doubt the King's Indian Defence and the Sicilian Defence. Not everyone feels comfortable playing these openings, but from the viewpoint of chess fans, these two fighting systems lead to the most spectacular and interesting games.

The Sicilian Defence is truly the choice of champions. Although Karpov only played it rarely, it has been a cornerstone in the Black repertoires of most of the world champions in my lifetime. Kasparov relied heavily upon it and played little else for most of his career. Kramnik was the great champion of the Sveshnikov Variation in the Sicilian Defence, until he came up with the Berlin Defence to frustrate Kasparov and claim the crown. Later on, he turned to the Najdorf, though this time without so much success. Topalov is a natural Sicilian player, as is Anand, although 1...e5 has also been a standard for these two champions. Magnus Carlsen is a truly versatile player, who played the Najdorf and the Dragon on his way up, while he recently returned to the Sveshnikov Variation against Caruana in the 2018 title defence – an opening he had not played since his junior days.

There are many ways to meet 1.e4, but all are essentially inferior in some way to two principal options – the Sicilian Defence and the Petroff/Classical Ruy Lopez/Berlin approach. While the latter may try to prevent a fight, the Sicilian is the archetypical fighting opening.

In my previous book, *King's Indian Warfare*, I looked at common themes in the KID and how they had occurred in my own games. The book was well received by reviewers and a segment of the chess public, so I saw no reason to change the format when it came to dealing with my other favourite opening.

Sicilian Warfare is not a theoretical work, but a book about what comes after memorization of opening moves. This is a feeling for the positional and especially the dynamic possibilities that arise from this extremely popular, double-edged opening. The structure of the book is simple. We look at ten different topics; mainly dynamic in nature, but with some exceptions. In each chapter I will give a brief overview of the theme with one or more clear-cut examples. Then I will present the themes in a complex setting in my own games.

There is one major difference between the two books, which is that I play 1.e4 with White and thus obtain the Sicilian with both colours. This gave me a greater number of games to choose from. Hopefully, you will be happy with the selection I have made.

At the start of each chapter you will find eight positions that will arise later in the chapter. These are positions I have selected from the chapter that work well as exercises. They are not necessarily tactical in nature, but simply snapshots from the games in the chapter, at points where they are most interesting.

I would like to thank IM Renier Castellanos and GM Colin McNab for editing the book and adding insights to it that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my friend and colleague, Moldavian Grandmaster Dmitry Svetushkin, who tragically passed away on 4th September 2020.

Ilya Smirin
Kfar Sava, September 2020

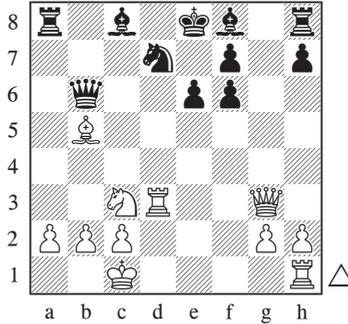
Chapter 1

Attacking the King in the Centre

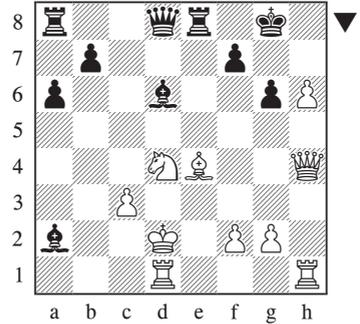


Test yourself against the book

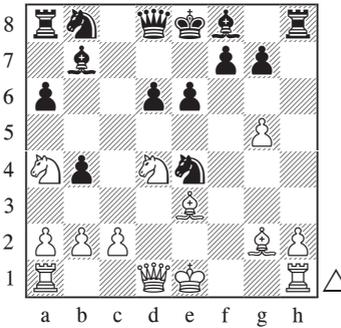
In this section you get a chance to train your Sicilian muscles and measure yourself against the variations in the book. Take as long as you like answering these questions. Some would want to make intuitive decisions, others to practise calculation. Both have their merits.



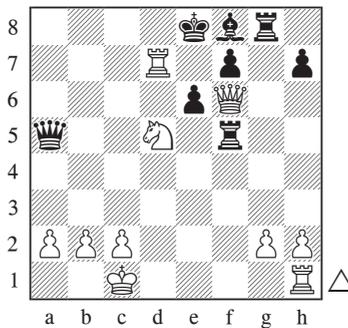
How should White continue the attack?
(see page 18)



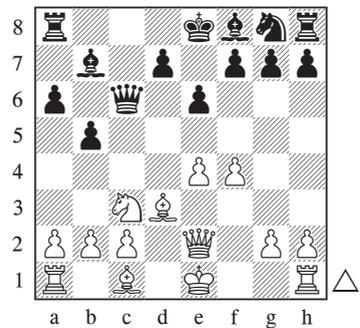
The white king looks exposed.
How can Black exploit it?
(see page 26)



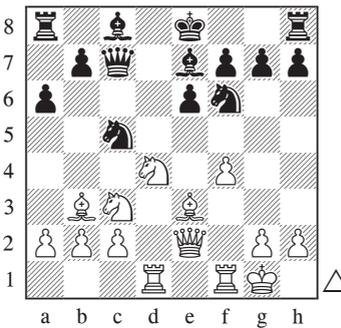
White to initiate an attack
(see page 10)



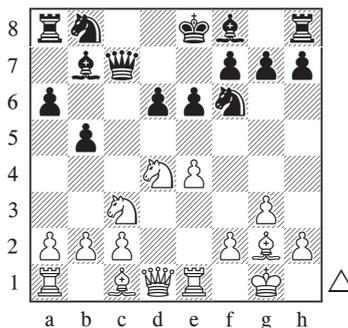
Add some energy to your play!
(see page 19)



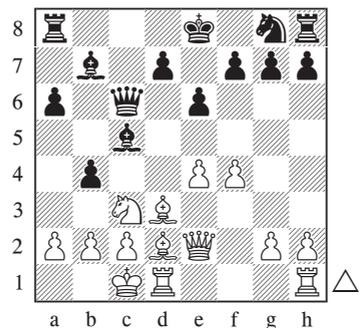
Which is the best square for the c1-bishop?
(see page 28)



Black is about to castle.
What can White do?
(see page 11)



What is the typical way to exploit the lead in development?
(see page 22)



An obvious move?
(see page 30)

My Games

We start with one of the first games that filled me with pride. It was played in the USSR youth team championship, held in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, which back then was part of the Soviet Union. My opponent Mikhail Rytshagov later became a grandmaster and a well-known coach. In 1984 he represented Estonia, while I was playing for Belarus.

Ilya Smirin – Mikhail Rytshagov

Tashkent 1984

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♕g5

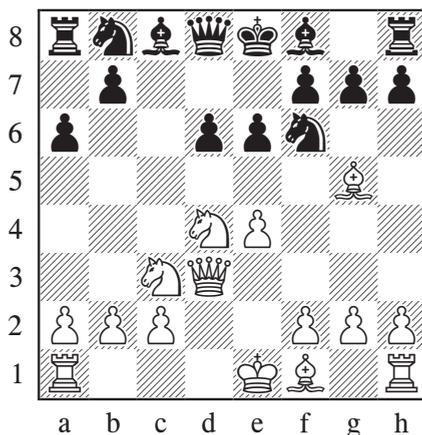
I loved to react to the Najdorf like this in my childhood. I was extremely optimistic and wanted to attack the black king as early as possible – hence this most aggressive move in the position. Some losses in this line (a couple of them against Boris Gelfand) could not discourage me. Later I became more versatile (I'd like to believe) and started to choose more “restrained” and “positional” ways to fight the Najdorf. Ever since 1985 I have abandoned (at least for now!) my passion for 6.♕g5. I would add that nowadays this line is highly popular once again and played at all levels.

6...e6

Today 6...♗bd7 is popular as well, which would have been hard to imagine in 1984 – 6...e6 had been played almost automatically since the great Bobby Fischer had enormous success in this line.

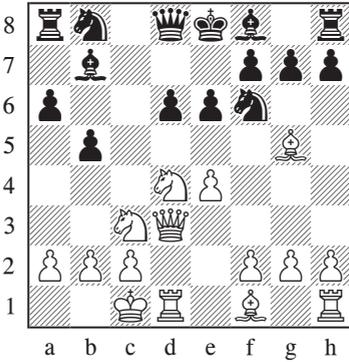
7.♚d3

Usually I, like almost everyone else, played 7.f4 here, but this time I wanted to try something different, and the game move came to mind. I decided to play it during the preparation for the game. I should say that my preparation proved to be quite effective – the first 16 moves of the game were brought from home – not a bad achievement in the pre-computer era.



7...♗bd7

The only other game in which I played
 7.♖d3 continued in different fashion:
 7...b5 8.0–0–0 ♖b7?!



9.♗xe6!?

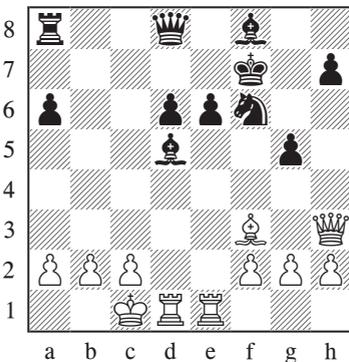
Played in the Romantic Style.

9.♗xf6 ♜xf6 (9...gxf6 looks dubious for Black, as the bishop may easily be misplaced on b7) 10.♗cxb5 ♖d8 11.♗c3 was objectively stronger.

9...fxe6 10.e5 b4 11.exf6 gxf6 12.♖d4 fxg5 13.♖xh8 bxc3 14.♖xc3 ♗d7 15.♗e2 ♖f7 16.♖h3 ♗f6?

16...♖f6! was the correct way to defend.

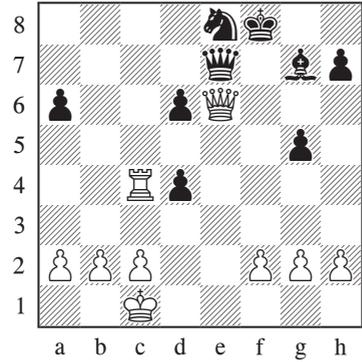
17.♖he1 ♗d5 18.♗f3



18...♗g7?! 19.♗xd5 exd5 20.♖e6† ♖f8 21.♖d3

White is by now clearly better.

21...♖a7 22.♖c3 ♖c7 23.♖ee3 d4 24.♖xc7 ♖xc7 25.♖d3 ♖d8 26.♖b3 ♖c7 27.♖b4 ♗e8 28.♖c4 ♖e7

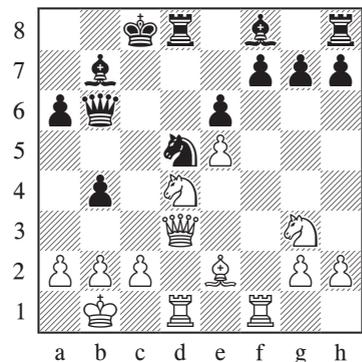


29.♖xe7† ♖xe7 30.♖c6 ♗e5 31.♖xa6 ♗f6 32.♖a7† ♖e6 33.h3 ♗d5 34.♖c7 h5 35.a4 ♗e4 36.a5 d3 37.cxd3 ♗c5 38.♖c2 ♗e6 39.♖c4 ♗d4† 40.♖d1 ♗b5 41.♖c2 ♗d4† 42.♖b1 ♗c6 43.b4 ♗d4 44.f3 h4 45.♖c2 ♗a7 46.♖b3 ♗b5 47.a6 ♗b6 48.♖a4 ♗d4 49.♖c8

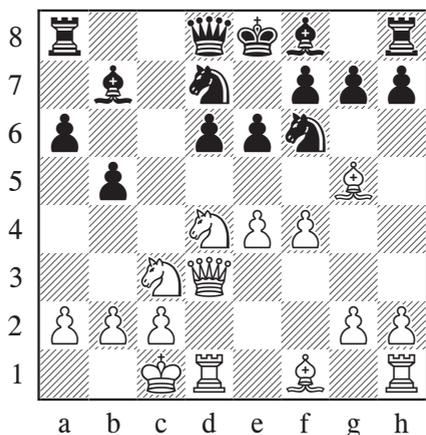
1–0 Smirin – Basin, Belarus 1984.

8.0–0–0 b5 9.f4 ♗b7

I ceased playing this line after I discovered that Black could immediately attack the c3-knight with 9...b4 here. It was tested in the following high-level game: 10.♗c2 ♖a5 11.♗xf6 ♗xf6 12.e5 ♗d5 13.♖b1 dxe5 14.fxe5 ♗b7 15.♗g3 0–0–0 16.♗e2 ♖b6 17.♖hf1



17...♗c3† 18.bxc3 bxc3† 19.♗b3 ♖xd3 20.♖xd3 ♗b4 21.a3 ♗xa3 22.♖xc3† ♖b8 23.♖xf7 a5 24.♗f3 ♗xf3 25.gxf3 ♗b4 26.♖c4 ♖c8 Black soon won in A. Kovalev – Bologan, Minsk 2000.

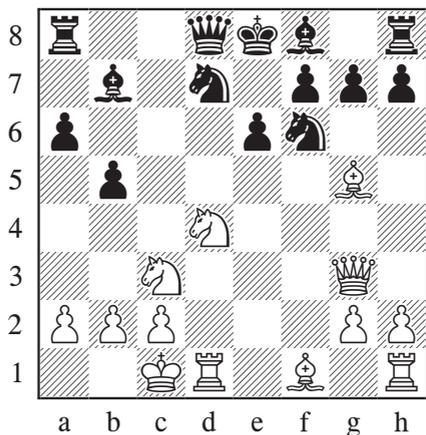


10.e5!

Ever forward! Black's set-up is very active, but he is temporarily lagging in development. That's why there is no time for prophylactic moves such as 10.a3?.

10...dxe5 11.fxe5 ♖xe5 12.♖g3 ♗ed7

The only other option is the computer's suggestion: 12...♗b8!? 13.♗e2! (neither 13.♗dxb5 ♗e7! nor 13.♗f4? ♗h5 14.♗xe5 ♗xg3 15.♗xb8 ♗xh1 would do) 13...♗ed7 14.♗f4 e5 The most natural move. 15.♗xb5! exf4 16.♗xd7† ♗xd7 17.♗he1† ♗e5 18.♗xf4 f6 19.♗e6 White's attack looks highly dangerous.



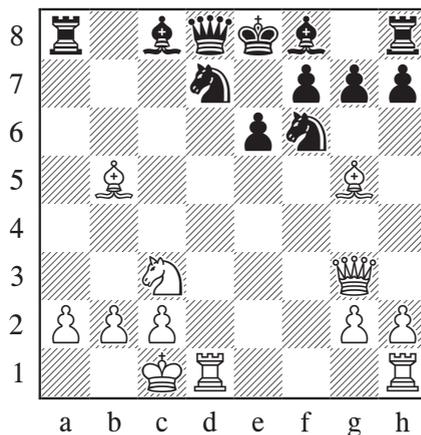
13.♗dxb5!

Continuing in the sacrificial spirit – White puts more fuel on the fire.

The only serious alternative would be to play 13.♗xf6 first, and after 13...gxf6 to make the same sacrifice: 14.♗dxb5!

13...axb5 14.♗xb5 ♗c8

The only defence.



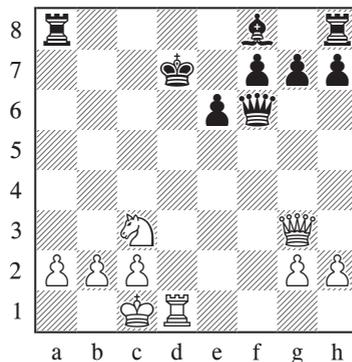
15.♗xf6!

Again the right decision – quite often one can increase the attack by exchanging pieces.

15...gxf6

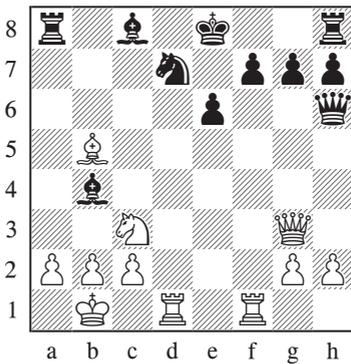
Mikhail replies with the correct recapture.

In the event of 15...♗xf6 I was planning to continue 16.♗xd7†? ♗xd7 17.♗xd7 ♗xd7 18.♗d1†, but it turns out that Black can defend:



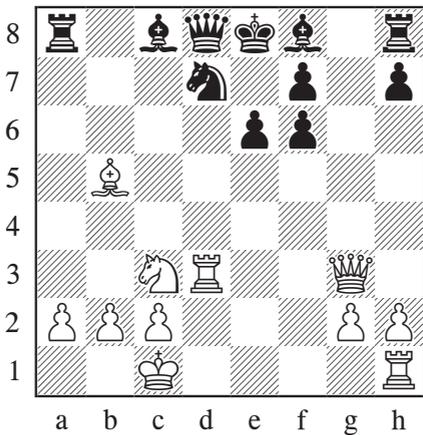
18...♔e8 (weaker is 18...♔c6 19.♘e4 ♖e7 20.♞d4! ♞a5 21.♞b8) 19.♞c7 (19.♘b5 ♙b4! 20.♘c7† ♔e7 21.♘xa8 ♞xa8†) 19...♞d8 20.♞c6† ♔e7 21.♞c7† ♔e8 White only has a draw.

However, artificial intelligence immediately points out that 15...♞xf6 can be met by the logical: 16.♞hf1! ♞h6† (16...♞e7 17.♙c6 or 16...♞d8 17.♞f3 is even worse) 17.♔b1 ♙b4



18.♙c6! 0-0 (or 18...♙xc3 19.♞xc3 ♞b8 20.♞c5 and the black king is doomed) 19.♙xa8 White is winning.

16.♞d3



White plans to double rooks along the d-file, applying maximum pressure against the

pinned d7-knight. White has only one pawn for the sacrificed piece, but the initiative is strong and outweighs this deficit. Black faces a difficult and unpleasant task to somehow coordinate his forces (for instance to connect his rooks) and try to defend his king which is stuck in the centre of board.

16...♞b6

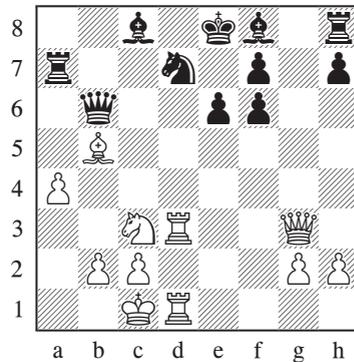
After 16...♙b4, which for a long time I thought was the best move, White may calmly proceed with 17.a4! when a sample continuation is: 17...♔f8 18.♞hd1 ♞g8 19.♞h4 ♙xc3 20.♞h6† ♞g7 21.bxc3 ♔g8 22.♙xd7±

In the case of 16...♞a7 17.♞hd1 ♙e7 18.♞g7 ♞f8 19.♔b1, Black would be firmly tied up.

17.♞f3:

The wrong approach – White is in a hurry to “cash out”.

I should have improved the position to the maximum: 17.♞hd1 ♞a7 18.a4!



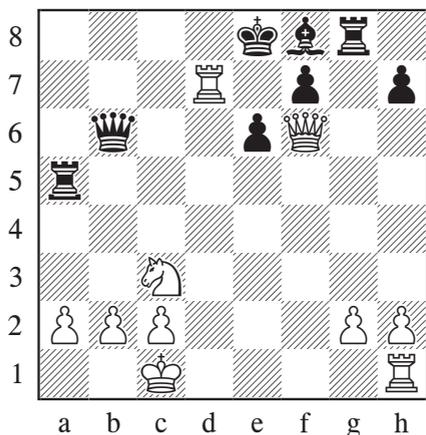
Black probably cannot hold this – the difference in piece activity is huge. Despite White having no immediate threats, he may do almost whatever he pleases, for instance: 18...♙e7 19.♘e4 ♞c7 20.♞b3 ♞a7 21.♘d6† ♙xd6 22.♞xd6 ♔d8 23.♙c6 ♞a5 24.♞c3 ♞e5 25.♞b4 and so on.

17...♖a5?

The decisive mistake.

After the correct 17...♖b8 18.♖hd1 ♖b7 Black would have a much better version of what we saw in the previous note – by moving the queen from the ideal g3-square, White has effectively gifted Black a couple of tempos. Play could continue: 19.a4 ♕h6† 20.♖b1 0–0 21.♗e4 ♕g7 22.♖xd7 ♕xd7 23.♗xf6† ♕xf6 24.♖xf6 ♖d8 (or 24...♕xb5 25.♖g5† ♖h8 26.♖f6† with perpetual check) 25.c4 (25.♖e7 h6 26.♖f6 will lead to perpetual check in all variations too) Stockfish evaluates this position as dead equal.

18.♕xd7† ♕xd7 19.♖xf6 ♖g8 20.♖xd7



20...♖f5!

My opponent was evidently counting on this defence. For a moment Black appears to be okay, but...

21.♗d5!

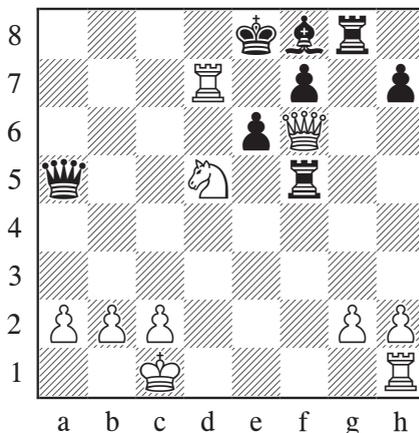
A simple but attractive tactical blow.

Of course, 21.♖d4? ♖xd4 22.♖xd4 ♖xg2 would lead nowhere.

21...♖a5

Again the only response to avoid immediate collapse.

White's three key pieces are hanging, but none of them can be taken: 21...♖xd5 22.♖xf7# or 21...exd5 22.♖xb6+– or 21...♖xf6 22.♗xf6#.



22.♖d1!

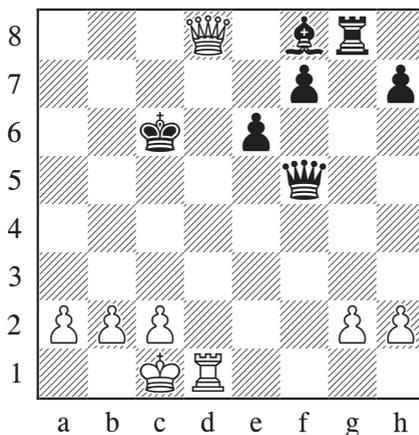
Another simple but aesthetic move – the last piece joins the attack.

Incidentally, White could have fallen into a trap: 22.♖xf5?? Beautiful but wrong. 22...♕h6†! Oops! (avoiding 22...exf5 23.♗f6#) 23.♖b1 exf5 24.♗f6† ♖f8 25.♗xg8 ♖xg8 Black even has the better of it now.

22...♗xd7

The only way to stay in the game, but now the black king starts its journey.

23.♗e7† ♖c7 24.♗xf5 ♖xf5 25.♖d8† ♖c6



26.♔b1!

The winning prophylactic move, parrying the threat of ...♙h6†. Now Black's rook and bishop remain out of play and unable to help their monarch in time.

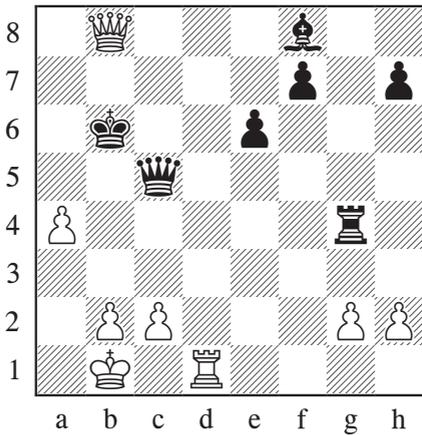
26...♖c5 27.a4?!

I wanted to create a *luft* and simultaneously include the a-pawn in the attack, but I should have been more modest: 27.a3! ♖g4 28.♞d3 ♙d6 29.♖c8† ♔b5 30.♞b3† would be curtains for Black.

27...♞g4 28.♖c8†

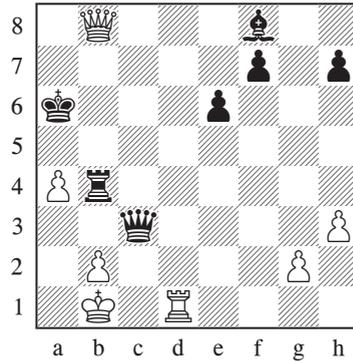
Of course, now 28.♞d3 ♖g1† 29.♔a2?? is impossible because of 29...♞xa4†.

28...♔b6 29.♖b8†



29...♔a5?

Much more stubborn was 29...♔c6 although it would not save the game: 30.h3 ♞b4 31.♖a8† ♔c7 32.♖d8† ♔c6 33.♖d7† ♔b6 34.c3! ♖xc3 (or 34...♞b3 35.♖xf7+— and the black rook is trapped in the event of 35...♖f5† 36.♖xf5 exf5 37.♔c2) 35.♖d8† ♔a6 36.♖a8† ♔b6 37.♖b8† ♔a6

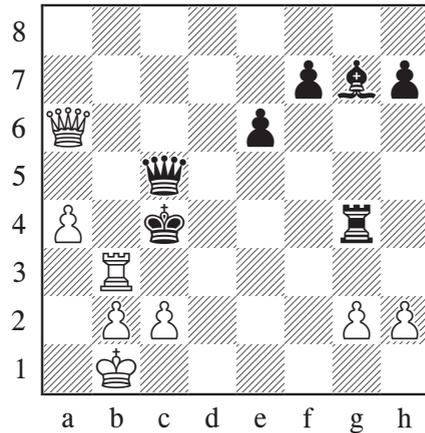


38.♖b5†! ♞xb5 39.axb5† ♔xb5 40.bxc3 But this win would have needed to be found!

30.♖a8† ♔b4

The king is a most welcome visitor!

31.♞d3 ♙g7 32.♞b3† ♔c4 33.♖a6†



Black resigned. What can I say? I love this game!

1-0