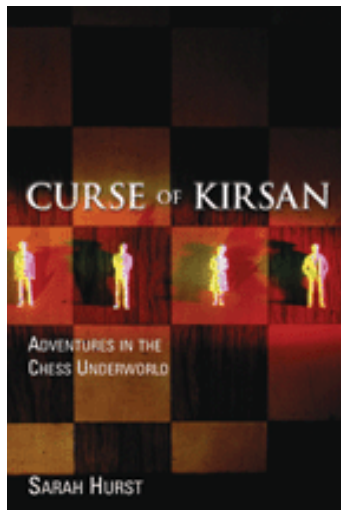




COLUMNISTS

*Misha
Interviews...*

Misha Savinov



Interview with Ruslan Kashtanov

Ruslan Kashtanov. Born in 1979 in Ukraine. International Master, current rating 2352. FIDE trainer. The youngest trainer at the Anichkov Palace (former Pioneers' Palace) in St. Petersburg.

Misha Savinov: When did you begin playing chess?

Ruslan Kashtanov: I learned the rules of chess relatively late, at the age of eight, at a local teenager's club. Such clubs were quite common in the Soviet Union – teenagers and young children could meet and participate in activities such as art, music, chess, etc. I was immediately captivated by the game, and was soon playing there six hours a day, six days a week. There were no regular lessons; we only had an instructor who kept an eye on us. We played as many games as we liked, and learned chess from practice.

MS: When did you first have more structured lessons?

RK: At some point I took part in a Belaya Ladja school competition, and I was noticed by a senior trainer in Sevastopol, Alexander Bondar, who now lives in Israel. Alexander Onischuk was one of his pupils. Bondar invited me to attend regular chess lessons, and at the age of nine I traveled to Sevastopol every day, two hours one way, only to study chess. At eleven, I won the city under-18 championship, and won it every time I participated. At fifteen, I won the Crimean championship, and then we moved to St. Petersburg.

MS: Did you play in the Ukrainian championships?

RK: Of course, but I did not really excel in them. Pupils from Kart's school in Lvov and boys from Kharkov won most of the events. Still, I met many future strong grandmasters. Recently I had a chance to chat with Moiseenko, and I was surprised that he still remembers our game from an U-14 championship, where he won a pawn in the opening, but somehow I managed to survive and make a draw. Mikhail Prusikin, now a German grandmaster, was one of the brightest stars of those years.

MS: Did you move to St. Petersburg to study?

RK: Yes, to study in the School of Olympic Reserve – the first chess player after Epishin to enter that school. However, I dropped out rather quickly. St. Petersburg proved much more competitive in chess than Crimea. I had to work very hard, up to



seven hours a day. IM Vladimir Shushpanov was my first trainer in St. Petersburg. I made a breakthrough the next year, and my first international rating was about 2300.

MS: Why did you drop out of the sports school?

RK: With the eleventh grade looming, I realized that if I spent another year in that school, I would be unable to enter a decent college. If my Elo was 2400, this would not be a problem, but at 2300 it was too bold to think about being a chess professional. So I transferred to a regular school and made up for lost time. After school I studied in the St. Petersburg Forest Technical Academy, and participated in many scholastic events. Our Academy won the all-Russian intercollegiate championship once.

MS: Did you also play in open tournaments?

RK: Yes, of course! I played in all semifinals of the city championship, qualifying for the final twice. In one of the finals I scored 50%, and was very unlucky to lose a winning position with an extra pawn against Alekseev in the penultimate round. With fifteen minutes on the clock against the opponent's three, I simply dropped my queen because of nervousness.

MS: When did you begin teaching chess?

RK: I began teaching during my second year in college.

MS: It is rare for a young player to teach. Was it necessity, or did you really like teaching chess?

RK: At that time it was more of necessity. I come from a big family – I have four sisters – and I obviously needed some extra income for living. I started teaching in district schools, and after graduation became a trainer at the Khalifman school. I also got married, and it was a very busy time. My teaching career began well – the pupils progressed rapidly and played well in local tournaments; one made first category at age eight. I played actively until about twenty-two years old, and then turned to full-time teaching. My maximum Elo was about 2420.

MS: How often do you play now? Is it important for a trainer to remain a practical player?

RK: Naturally, it is very important. I analyze a lot anyway, but there are two considerations: first, you can sense the real struggle only at the board, and second, some positions can be understood only in practical play. If you don't play them, you have no right to advise your students about them. I play three or four tournaments a year; mainly in the summer, which is quite short.



MS: What was the next step of your teaching career?

RK: There was a radical shift. In 2003, I left St. Petersburg to take a position at the Chess Academy in Singapore.

MS: How did you obtain it?

RK: There was a family from Singapore who took lessons in the Khalifman school, and I asked the father of the family about employment opportunities in his country. He helped me find that position, and in August I flew to Singapore. I worked until June 2005 – almost two years.

MS: Is this Ignatius Leong's academy?

RK: Right, he is the chairman.

MS: Who teaches there, mostly Russians?

RK: No, there aren't many Russians. There is grandmaster Varavin, and a few girls – Portniagina, Zakharova... Chasovnikova spent two months, and returned home.

MS: What is the Academy like?

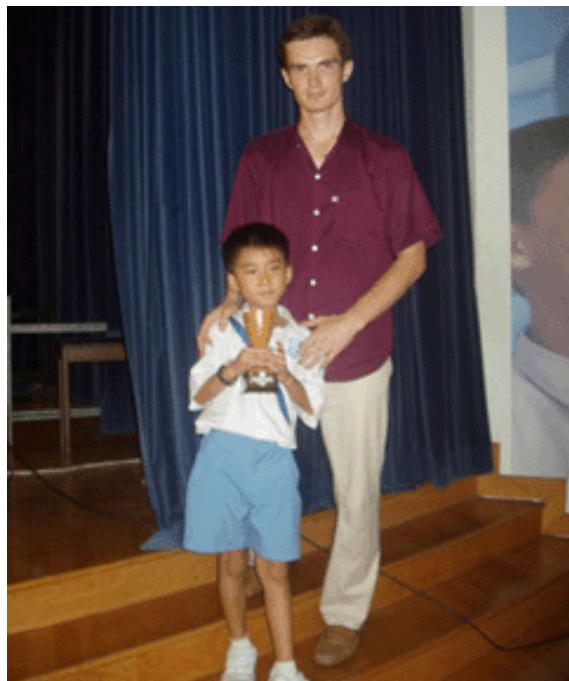
RK: It is a purely commercial enterprise, ruled by a Board of Directors. There are many shareholders, and I don't think Leong is the major shareholder. Of course, it was very difficult in the beginning, especially with the language. The country is very interesting and unusual; one needs to adjust to it. Acclimatization took a lot of time, because the climate is very different from what I am used to, it is very hot and humid.

MS: What was your assignment?

RK: The schedule is very flexible. Initially we decided on thirty hours per week. Usually a trainer is sent to either private or group lessons, depending on his or her popularity. If you are assigned to private lessons, then you just receive the name and address of the student and the rest is your responsibility. Group lessons are usually given to junior squads, which are basically national teams in age groups. The Academy also organizes seminars and workshops in Singapore and other countries.

I was doing well. My pupil Daryl Wong became a champion of South-Eastern Asia under-10 and under-12. Dominic Lo has become a member of the national team, although he does not play much now. You know, at fourteen Asian children change their priorities completely – they need a good education, and chess becomes a pastime. Jason Goh, a student of Tibor Karolyj (who also taught Leko and Polgar), was rated above 2400 at thirteen and once surpassed Magnus Carlsen in the world junior championship, but shows almost no progress now. Perhaps it is because Tibor left Singapore, but more likely it is from studying at the university.

Interestingly, teaching at the Academy proved dangerous for private life. I saw many divorces and I divorced from my first wife – young people must not live away from each other. Tibor also divorced, and he is a father of three.



MS: Was Singapore generally a positive experience for you?

RK: Yes. I learned a lot about chess and teaching methods, improved my English, and became a certified FIDE trainer.

MS: What are the requirements to become a FIDE trainer?

RK: One has to be rated above 2300 at any time in his or her career and pass a test.

MS: What kind of test?

RK: There are chess questions – position to solve – as well as pedagogical questions. It is not easy to pass actually, although I'm afraid that the requirements were recently lowered, as I saw many relatively unskilled trainers passing it.

MS: Why did you return from Singapore?

RK: It was as quick as lightning. The Board decided that it was more profitable for the Academy to hire two Filipinos instead. I received a ticket home and five hours to pack. Alas, it turned out that my contract allows it. Always be wary of the fine print! After that

I spent six months trying to receive my last two months salary.

After I returned from Singapore, I resumed working for Khalifman, and began teaching at Anichkov Palace. I also give lessons on the ICC, but that only provides pocket money. However, the salaries of chess trainers in Russia has improved considerably, so with a couple of groups in the Palace, and a number of private pupils, I can make a decent living.

MS: Do you like this kind of life?

RK: I am happy, because my work and my favorite pastime coincide. Sometimes it comes to extremes: I analyze interesting positions for hours and hours, then accept some challenge to play online, and cannot stop, and it seems I play all the time. However, it is not a bad thing, as chess does not forgive those who are unfaithful to it. If you stop playing, your skill deteriorates very quickly. A couple of year ago I already played like a trainer, and felt very upset.

MS: What do you mean by “played like a trainer”?

RK: I based my play on setting cheap traps and playing for tricks. It is true! You analyze all the time, and your knowledge expands, but your energy decreases, and you cannot play a high-quality game.

MS: What is the best age for chess improvement?

RK: Generally, I think ones skill increases rapidly until about twenty-three years of age. There are some exceptions, like Jakovenko, who seems to grow with every tournament he plays, but after twenty-three one gains strength only through experience – clever time management, tournament selection, etc.

MS: Having worked in chess schools in Asia and Russia, could you compare the advantages and disadvantages of both systems?

RK: In Russia we have sports schools. The education is quite demanding; it is well-planned, fundamental, and time consuming. First year children have four two-hour lessons per week: two theoretical lessons and two tournament days. By the end of the year most children should make the third category (about 1300) and some can make second (about 1600).



MS: How do you teach theory? Is there a universal system applied in the Palace?

RK: Each trainer develops his own approach to the theoretical lessons, and, in fact, the students can attend the lessons of any coach they like, which is another benefit of studying in the Palace. The opportunity to see different sets of ideas and opinions is quite valuable. I base my lectures on Golenischev's books, and add new examples from other sources, especially from Pozharsky's textbooks. This is, of course, if we are talking about general middlegame and endgame theory. Opening theory is a different story.

MS: How does one teach opening theory at a group lesson! It is an individual effort by definition.

RK: At group lessons I show typical positions, based on pawn structures, which are useful for the general understanding of chess as well as for certain openings. After an hour of theory, the children play quick games in this structure, and if someone likes such positions, I can recommend a corresponding opening. I will bring a book, or a printout with good analysis, for the student to examine during the lesson.

Everyone is different. Some can fianchetto a bishop to g7, and others only feel comfortable with the bishop on c5 or b4. It is difficult to explain, but one should not go against nature – neither a pupil, nor a trainer. In all these years, I have had one or two pupils who utilized my own opening repertoire, but only because it matched them perfectly.

When I studied with Shushpanov, Kochyev, and Aseev, these lessons influenced my middlegame play more than my openings. This is especially true about Konstantin Aseev. Talking about prophylaxis, he showed me puzzles that were harder than Dvoretsky's; situations where the queen goes from e2 to f1 on a board full of pieces, and White obtains a decisive advantage. This is possible when White has a static advantage, and Black has two strong threats on the kingside. A good prophylactic move parries them both, and the advantage begins to tell. Such things make a very strong impression.

MS: What is the correlation between playing skill and coaching skill?

RK: It goes without saying that not every excellent chess player can become a trainer. Some players are just too talented, like Svidler. Others pushed their way through by years of hard work, like Aseev. The latter realize the difficulty of chess, and the ways to overcome it, and they often become excellent trainers. Konstantin Aseev was really a top trainer.

MS: What is the most difficult skill to teach?

RK: It is very difficult to instill fighting spirit. The worst sin in chess is poor fighting spirit. Also, tactical vision is difficult to develop. For instance, if someone can solve training positions easily, but misses similar opportunities at the board, what can you do about it? Calculation skill is relatively easier to develop. Therefore, at my lessons, beginners start with tactics: we solve combination puzzles, do homework, and work in our weekly computer class. So, you see, the Palace keeps developing. The Soviet chess school is still here, but it is modernized to keep pace with the changing world.

MS: How would you define the Soviet chess school?

RK: Ah... You know, according to Alexey Yuneev (one of the most experienced trainers of the Palace – M.S.), the difference is visible in positions with a material imbalance. “Soviet” students have a more fundamental background, and their understanding of chess dynamics tells in “crazy” positions. Without a doubt! We all know Boleslavsky. It is impossible to understand the KID or the ideas behind the Sveshnikov Sicilian without Boleslavsky’s games. I am not sure many foreign players are familiar with them. The most important books of the Black Series are the biographies of Boleslavsky and Rubinstein – I show them to my students as early as possible. (A very popular series of game collections, distinguished by their black covers — M.S.) In principle, I think Yuneev is correct. It is difficult to find other serious differences. Of course, Russians were always noted for their fighting spirit, but so are other Eastern Europeans, as well as the Chinese.

MS: Why do you think there is no super-GM from China?

RK: Maybe this is connected to a certain lack of schooling. Ye is a legend, of course, but there cannot be many excellent trainers in a country without a chess tradition. And China, unlike India, does not invite skilled foreign trainers. Look at the openings of, say, Ni Hua. He is a strong 2650 player, but his openings are not impressive at all. The best Chinese players succeed because of their talent, not all-round fundamental preparation, and it becomes hard to progress further with such gaps in one’s knowledge. However, I am not sure many Asian countries can make an attractive offer for a Russian trainer now, because the Russian economy is growing, and one can make a living by teaching.

MS: Now that more people can find stable jobs, wouldn’t there be fewer people eager to make a living by playing chess?

RK: Not really. Studying chess has many benefits, and becoming a grandmaster is not the most attractive aspect for a parent. All of our pupils continue their education in college. Of course, colleges are always eager to obtain good sportsmen, but not all graduates are chess stars.

MS: Finally, what is your view on the future of chess?

RK: Professional chess may be in a crisis, with players turning to poker or better paying jobs. However, chess education flourishes, and with good reason. Chess is very good for

memory, calculation skill, character, etc. Governments will soon realize the benefits of chess, and the importance of junior chess will increase, while professional chess will need to change in some way to attract more public interest.

Ruslan Kashtanov Annotates

Solozhenkin (2504) – Kashtanov (2367)

Chigorin Memorial Open, St. Petersburg (5), 05.11.2000

I actually won this game because of home preparation. I searched my opponent's games and discovered that he always plays 1.e4 against those who play the French. He beat Morozevich in a sharp fight with Qg4 (Chigorin mem 1997), so I found a scheme to employ in the game!

1.e4

I predicted correctly!

1...e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4

Usually I play Nf6, but not on this day.

4.e5 c5 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.bxc3 Nc6?!

A dubious, but interesting system, which I found in an old issue of *New In Chess*.

7.Qg4

Bingo! 7.Nf3 Nge7 transposes to classical lines.

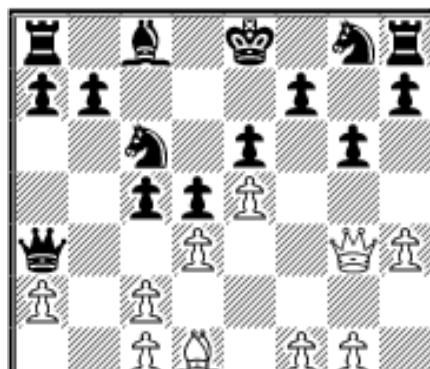
7...g6

Without a dark-squared bishop this move looks dangerous for Black. The weakness of the dark squares, plus a backward f-pawn seems to promise a quick defeat. On the other hand, there are some concrete threats to White's pawn chain.

8.h4

8.Qd1! is best. Having provoked a weakness on kingside it can go home, but my opponent wants to crush me immediately: 8...Qa5 9.Bd2 Qa4 10.Nf3 cxd4 (10...b6!?) 11. Bd3 with compensation; 8.Nf3!?, 8.a4!?

8...Qa5 9.Bd2 Qa4



10.h5?

A serious mistake! 10.Ra2! Nxe5? This pawn is actually poisoned. It is impossible to defend the dark squares in Black's camp without it. a) 10...h5 11.Qf4 b6 12.dxc5 Qxf4 13.Bxf4 bxc5 14. Rb2 Nge7 15.Nf3; b) 10...f5!? A typical attempt to deal with the backward f7-pawn. 11.



Qg3! (11.Qf4 h6 12.dxc5! Qe4+! 13.Qxe4 dxe4 14.Be3 Nge7 15.Bd4 f4 16.Ne2 0-0) 11...cxd4 (11...Nge7 12.h5 Rg8 13.hxg6) 12.Ne2 (12.h5 dxc3 13.Bxc3 Nge7 14.Rh4 d4 15.Nf3 g5 16.Qxg5 (16.Nxg5 Rg8 17.h6) 16...Rg8) 12...Nge7

13.h5 dxc3 14.Nxc3 Qg4; 11.Qf4 Nc4 12.h5

Nxd2 (12...Ne7 13.Qf6 with an attack; 12...gxh5 13.Nf3 with compensation) 13.hxg6 fxg6 14.Qe5 Nf6 15.Qxf6 Rf8 16.Qg7 Nxf1 17.Rxh7 Qd7 18.Qxg6+ Rf7 19.Nf3+.

10...Qxc2 11.Nf3 cxd4 12.cxd4 h6!

Trying to cover the holes on the dark squares. 12...Qb2? 13.Rc1 Qxa3 14.hxg6 fxg6 15.Rh3! Nge7 16.Ng5 h5 17.Qf4 Qa4 18.Nf7 0-0 19.Rf3+.

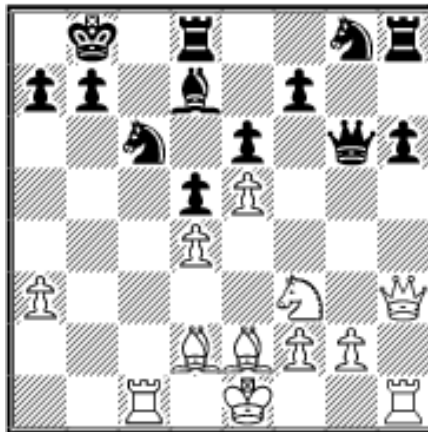
13.hxg6 Qxg6 14.Qh3?!

14.Qxg6!? fxg6 15.Bd3 Kf7 16.Ke2 Bd7 17.Rab1 b6 18.Rbc1 Kg7 19.Bb4 Nge7 20.Bxe7 Nxe7 21.Rc7 Rhd8 22.Ba6 with compensation; 14.Qh4 Nge7.

14...Bd7 15.Rc1 0-0-0 16.Be2?!

16.Qh4!? Re8 17.Bg5 Kb8 18.Kd2 Nge7 19.Bf6 Nf5 20.Qf4 with sufficient compensation.

16...Kb8



Black is OK.

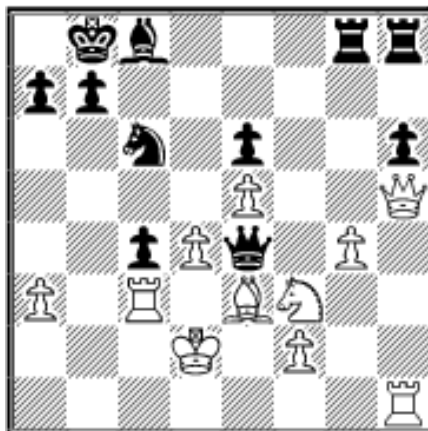
17.Rc3 Qb1+!

The black queen is very successful as a lone attacker!

18.Bd1 Nge7 19.g4

Preventing Nf5.

19...Rdg8 20.Be3 Na5! 21.Qh4 Nec6 22.Qf6 Nc4 23.Qxf7 Nb2 24.Kd2 Bc8 25.Qh5 Qe4 26.Be2 Nc4+ 27.Bxc4 dxc4-/+

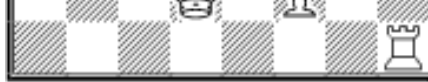


Now the black knight has an excellent outpost on d5, and the white king is not safe. The game is over.

28.Ke2 b6 29.g5

29.Rh4 Ne7 30.Nd2 Qg2 31.Nxc4 Nd5 32.Rc1 Ba6-+.

29...Rf8 30.Rh4 Qb1 31.gxh6 Ne7 32.Bd2



32.Ne1 Nd5 33.Rc1 Qb2+ 34.Rc2 c3 35.Bc1 Qb1 36.h7 Ba6+ 37.Kd1 Rxf2-+.

32...Nd5 33.Rc1 Qd3+ 34.Ke1 Rxf3 35.Qg5 c3 0-1

A pure psychological victory!

Malyshev (2300) – Kashtanov (2295)
Sevastopol (Ukraine), Round Robin (3), 04.1998

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5

I have been successfully playing the French since I was eleven years old. I prefer positions with clear plans for both sides.

3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2!?

A very arrogant move. White will try to grasp everything in the center, so Black must play very energetically to avoid total collapse.

5...c5 6.c3 Nc6

This looks natural, but it is probably not the strongest. 6...cxd4! 7.cxd4 f6 8.Nf4 (8.f4!? fxe5 9.fxe5 Bb4+ 10.Kf2 0-0+ 11.Nf3 Nc6-/+ 8...Bb4+ 9.Bd2 Qb6! 10.Bxb4 (10.Qh5 +?! g6 11.Nxg6 Bxd2+ 12.Kxd2 Qxb2+ (12...Qxd4+ 13.Kc1) 13.Ke3 Qxa1 14.Nxh8+ Kd8 15.Nf7+ Kc7 16.Ne2 Nc6 17.f4 b6-/+ 10...Qxb4+ 11.Qd2 Qxd2+ 12.Kxd2 Ke7 13.Nf3 (13.exf6+?! gxf6 14.Re1 Nb6 15.Bd3 Nc6 16.Nf3 Kd6!-/+ Bezgodov-Sakaev, 1999, 0-1) 13...Nc6=.

7.Nf3 cxd4 8.cxd4 f6

Another typical French undermining.

9.Nf4!?

9.exf6 Nxf6 (9...Qxf6!?) 10.Nc3 Bd6 leads to well-known positions from 3.Nd2 Nf6 lines.

9...Bb4+

9...fxe5 10.Nxe6 Qb6 11.a3!? Nxd4 12.Nfxd4 exd4 13.Qh5+ Ke7 14.Nf4 Nf6 15.Qg5 with compensation.

10.Bd2 Qe7 11.exf6 Nxf6 12.Bb5!?! Bxd2+ 13.Qxd2 Ne4 14.Bxc6+

14.Qa5 0-0 15.Bxc6 Rxf4 16.Bb5 Ng5 17.Nxg5 Qxg5 18.0-0 Rxd4.

14...bxc6 15.Qa5



White is going to get control over the dark squares, so Black should play very carefully.



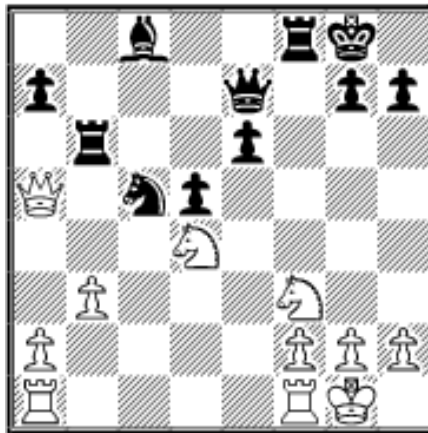
15...c5!

15...0-0?! This natural move could lead to the very unpleasant ending: 16.Nd3 Rb8 17.0-0 Rb6 18.Nfe5 Ba6 19.f3 Bxd3 20.Nxd3 Nd6 21.Qc5.

16.0-0 0-0 17.Ne2

How to develop the bishop?

17...Rb8! 18.b3 Rb6! 19.dxc5 Nxc5 20.Ned4



White is still hoping to build a blockade by Ne5 and f4, but...

20...Nd3!

An excellent position for the knight! Keeping control over the c1- and e1-squares, and preventing Ne5. The only logical plan is to apply pressure on the knight. 20...e5?? 21.Nxe5 ±.

21.Rfd1 Ba6 22.Rd2 Qd6!

Now I have a tempo to push e5 – the dream of any French player!

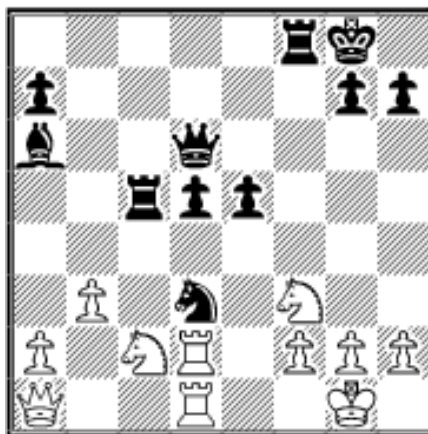
23.Rad1 e5 24.Nc2

All White's pieces are bad, except the queen, so...

24...Rb5! 25.Qc3?

Probably the decisive mistake. 25.Qa4 Rf4 26.Qa3 Qxa3 27.Nxa3 Ra5 28.Nb1 Rc5-/+ or 25.Qa3 Qxa3 26.Nxa3 Ra5 27.Nb1 Rc8-/+ leads to a clear edge for Black, but the fight is still ahead.

25...Rc5 26.Qa1



The triumph of Black's undermining strategy! He managed to destroy White's pawn center, prevent a blockade, play ...e5 and squeeze all the enemy pieces onto the first ranks. So the coming storm is decisive.

26...Rxf3!

A typical exchange sacrifice, as logical and natural as a "baby's smile."

27.gxf3 (only move) 27...d4!



I thought that this was the strongest move, but I later realized that 27...Qg6+ was also possible: 27...Qg6+ 28.Kh1 Qf5! (28...Rxc2? loses after 29.Rxc2 Nf4 (29...Qf5 30.Rxd3 Bxd3) 30.Rg1 Qxc2 31.Qxe5+-). Now you can understand why I played d4, because it prevents Qxe5, prepares Bb7 and cuts White's position in half.) 29.Ne3 Qxf3+ 30.Ng2 d4+-.

28.Ne1 Qg6+ 29.Kh1 Nxe1 30.Rxe1 Bb7 31.Qd1?

31.Re4 Bxe4 32.fxe4 Qxe4+ 33.Kg1 Rc6+-.

31...Rc1! 0-1

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