



COLUMNISTS

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

Lev Alburt &
Al Lawrence



Summits and Cold War Combat

For those too young to recall the Cold War clearly, the word “summit” doesn’t retrieve the same associations as the term calls up for your co-authors. Lev Alburt escaped from the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. He was a boy in Odessa during the 1956 Hungarian Revolt against Soviet rule—a time when many under the brutal Red thumb expected the US to intervene on behalf of the brave Hungarian freedom fighters and thereby give a beacon-signal to other nations behind the “Iron Curtain” (an oxymoronic *mot just* first uttered by Winston Churchill in the small Missouri town of Moberly—just 30 miles from Lawrence’s college town). Alburt and his friends drew secret maps of important Odessa-area installations, planning to provide their drawings to the rescuing American paratroopers, who never landed.

At the same time, Al Lawrence, in a Chicago-area elementary school adorned with oversize photos of retired liberator Dwight D. Eisenhower, learned how to “duck and cover”—to crouch under his flimsy school desk while the emergency alarm screeched at a volume that made young eyes water. Pavlovian principles were hard-wired into millions of the first baby boomers. At the same time, the US Army was holding “training” exercises in which hundreds of troops, sans any protective clothing, practiced charging into the blast-area of a just-exploded atom bomb. (For a highlight reel of postwar practices, rent the video documentary *Atomic Café*.) Meanwhile, their children were schooled in the details of the impending mutual destruction of the Cold War opponents. It was the Stars and Stripes against the Hammer and Sickle, and each had hundreds of deadly “ICBM’s” (intercontinental ballistic missiles) permanently aimed at each other, enough to destroy their populations several times over, in a precarious balance known as “MAD”—mutually assured

destruction.

“Summits,” on the other hand, were critical opportunities, meetings between the most powerful national leaders, normally the American President and the Soviet Secretary General. These highest-level conferences provided a chance to reach an agreement on at least “nonproliferation,” arresting the production of missiles, and averting what Harvard science professor and piano-playing satirist Tom Lehrer called a worldwide “rotisserie.”

In this context, “summit” became an often-used and sometimes metaphorical term, designating a meeting of a powerful representative who went head-to-head with his adversary to negotiate to the advantage of his own constituency. There were actual summits throughout the 45-year-long Cold War. Late in the period, beginning in 1985, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev met in the first of their five summit conferences. In 1986, the two met in Reykjavik, Iceland, at the Horfdi House.

Chess Summits in Iceland

The next year, Reykjavik hosted a Nordic versus US match, in which Alburt participated. By 1990, the event grew to a true “summit” match between the US, England, the Nordic countries and the Soviet Union. Lawrence served as Team Captain for the US Team.

Iceland has traditionally been known as the nation with the highest percentage of chess players to its general population. In 1972, it had hosted the Fischer-Spassky match. Indeed, the Chess Summits were held at the center that displayed the chess table and chairs (dissembled during the championship match in a search for mind-interfering devices) used in the Cold War championship.

In the following game, illustrative of the spirited competition that was the norm at these Reykjavik tournaments, GM Lev Alburt demonstrates a major line of his favorite Benko Gambit. Annotations are by Alburt. Evaluations in brackets refer to Alburt’s SOPR (System of Predicted Results) 1-10 scale, which we’ve discussed in recent articles.

***Johann Hjartarson—Lev Alburt Nordic Countries vs. US,
Reykjavik, 1986 Benko Gambit***

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 c5 3. d5 b5 4. cxb5

Black sacrifices a pawn—for faster development, the initiative, and some long-lasting positional advantages that we'll discuss later. White can of course decline the gambit, at least temporarily, by 4. Nf3, 4. Qc2, 4. f3 or 4. a4. All of these moves are playable, but none of them promises White more than approximate equality (or at best a slight opening advantage), but then neither does the text move.

4...a6

Black's idea is to open the f1–a6 diagonal for his bishop and the a- and b-files for his rooks.

5. bxa6

Other good moves for White are 5. e3, 5. b6 (an idea of Roman Dzindzikhvili) and 5. Nc3.

5...g6

Why not 5...Bxa6? In fact, 5...Bxa6 is a good move, and usually leads to the same positions as 5...g6. The reason why I (and theory) suggests 5...g6 here is as follows: if White plays a rare system with the fianchetto of both his bishops (in this case the queen's knight does not go to c3, in order not to block the bishop on b2) Black's most efficient reply is to capture on a6 with his knight rather than his bishop, in order to play a later ... Nb4 with a double attack on the a2- and d5-pawns. This subtlety, however, is of no real importance, because Black has a good (equal) game even with his bishop (and not his knight) on a6.

6. Nc3 Bxa6



Now this capture is a must; otherwise White would play e2-e4 with a clear advantage. After 6...Bxa6 White has a choice: to play e2-e4 (as in the game) and to lose some tempi on artificial castling, or to fianchetto his light-square bishop, as in the games Averkin—Alburt and Hort—Alburt. White

could, of course, play 6. e3, but this loses at least one tempo, as he would eventually have to play e3-e4—Black simply completes his development by 6...Bg7 and 7...0-0, as he doesn't now have to worry about the otherwise possible e4-e5. Then Black will play ... Qb6 and take on a6 with his bishop, in order (after Bxa6 by White) to recapture on a6 with his queen. Black captures White's bishop only after it moves, thereby gaining another tempo. The latter is easy to achieve, as Black has more useful moves than White before taking on a6, e.g...d6 and ... Nbd7.

7. Nf3 d6 8. e4 Bxf1 9. Kxf1 Bg7



10. g3

On his 10th move White has to choose between faster development and a safer position for his king. He has decided in favor of the former, and plans to put his king on g2, where, however, it sometimes allows Black counterplay along the h1–a8 diagonal.

Also, if White ever plays f2-f3 in order to protect his e4-pawn, his king on the second rank becomes exposed.

Therefore White often plays 10. h3 here, especially as this is a good move anyway (it prevents a Black knight from using the g4-square), and then his king goes to h2. But this maneuver

takes three moves (one more than 10. g3 and 11. Kg2), and Black can use this extra tempo. Current theory considers these two variations (10. h3 and 10. g3) as equivalent; the evaluation of this position should be [5.0] or at most [5.3], something slightly below a normal opening advantage for White. In fact, which side you like to play here is very subjective, purely a matter of taste; I for instance, prefer Black.

10...0-0 11. Kg2 Nbd7

Also good here is 11...Na6.

12. Re1 Qb6

My favorite.



We have reached a classic position of the Benko Gambit, popular 25-30 years ago and now back in tournament practice after other, more ambitious White systems have been proved not dangerous for Black. Black is a pawn down, but he has the following long-lasting factors as compensation:

pressure on the a- and b-files, where his rooks cooperate effectively with his bishop at g7; control over two important diagonals (by the bishop and the queen on a6, which is where it goes), and, most importantly, a superior pawn structure, as all the Black pawns are connected in one huge “continent” whereas White has one smaller “continent” and one small vulnerable “island” (a2 and b2).

In the early 1970s White usually played 13. Qe2 here— until it was discovered that, paradoxically, Black could (and should) offer the exchange of queens by 13. ... Qa6. Paradoxically, because usually a side which sacrificed material tries to attack (and consequently, to avoid exchanges, especially the exchange of queens). But there are exceptions;

here, incidentally, it is possible to explain in very logical terms why the exchange of queens is beneficial for Black.

Black is going to play on the queenside, and in some variations this may leave his kingside vulnerable. Indeed, along with a breakthrough in the center, an attack on the Black king is one of White's best options in the Benko, and it is much more promising than the hope of eventually using his extra pawn in some unspecified remote ending. And without the queens, this threat, this option (an attack) is taken away from White; moreover, in an ending Black can often play ... f7-f5, attacking the White center, a plan which is very double-edged and risky with the queens still on the board.

Those who—like Walter Browne and myself—first discovered that Black is equal or better in various Benko endings, and that he should strive for them rather than avoid them, scored pretty well with Black in the early seventies, until this paradox became common knowledge, and players with White at last stopped regarding typical endings in the Benko Gambit as favorable and began looking for safety first, rather than feeling obliged to seek an illusory advantage.

By the way, the Benko Gambit is an excellent illustration of how openings should be studied—in close connection not only with the middlegame, but also the endgame. “What am I trying to achieve?”—this was the question I asked myself when preparing to play the Benko Gambit. “Is a draw everything I want and can possibly get?” And only when I found out, after much analysis, that Black has good chances for a win even after exchanging his c-pawn for White's a- and b- pawns—something that will be discussed later—then and only then did I decide that this was an opening I could use as my main weapon, not only on the rare occasions when a draw was desirable.

13. Re2

White protects his b-pawn and prepares to develop his bishop.

13...Rfb8 14. h3 Qa6



Putting pressure on the White rook. Now this rook is well protected, but just wait for a few moves. Besides, Black plans to maneuver his knight to c4 via b6; were it not for 14. h3, another maneuver, ... Ng4-e5-d3 (or even ... Qd3) would also be possible.

15. Bg5

Preventing the knight on f6 from leaving this square. Here I thought for nearly 10 minutes over my reply.

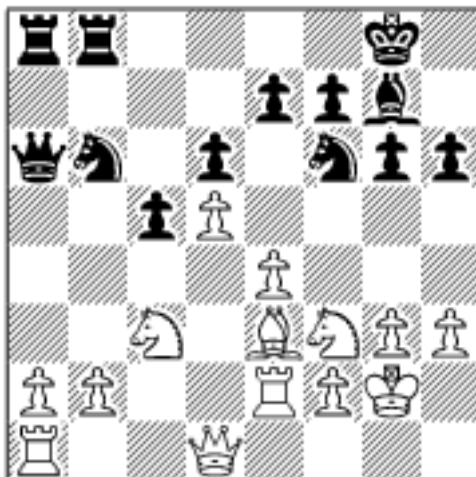
15...h6

This move creates a comfortable post for my king at h7, but it also weakens the king's pawn screen, which is an important factor in the middlegame; also, in some variations the h6-pawn remains unprotected. Still, give and take, this is the best move.

16. Be3

Instead, 16. Bf4 would allow Black, at an appropriate moment, to open the diagonal for his bishop with gain of tempo (... Nh5), and also, in some (not very likely) circumstances, the further bishop hunt ... g6-g5 could be possible.

After the move in the game White stands clearly worse—[4.0] at best. So, both 16. Bf4 and even 16. Bc1 should be analyzed, but without any real hopes of equality (to say nothing of an advantage) for White. Thus 15. Bg5 looks like an error, but without it Black can play with impunity 15...Ne8 followed 16...Nc7 and 17...Nb5, with a very comfortable game. Does this mean that the whole system chosen by White is toothless and does not promise him anything more than possible equality? It might.

16...Nb6

This thematic move is possible only because the White rook on e2 is insufficiently defended: 17. e5 is refuted by 17...Nfxd5.

17. Rc1

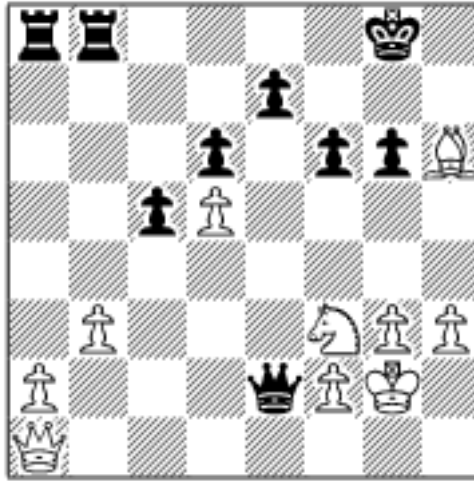
Why not 17. b3?, depriving the Black knight of the important c4-

square? First, I saw (before playing 16...Nb6) that after 17...Nxe4 18. Nxe4 Bxa1 19. Qxa1 Qxe2 20. Bxh6



Analysis: after 20. Bxh6 20...f6 21. Nxf6+! exf6 22. Qxf6 (all these moves are forced) 22...Ra7 (or 22...Rb7) White should (and could) draw by perpetual check. I continued my search, as I believed that Black should have more than a draw here, and because I didn't want to reject such an

otherwise nice move as 16...Nb6. Eventually I found the winning move—17...Nfxd5! Now after 18. Nxd5 (other lines are also very much in Black's favor) 18...Nxd5 19. exd5 Bxa1 20. Qxa1 Qxe2 21. Bxh6 f6,

**Analysis: after 21...f6**

we obtain a position similar to the one reached after Black's 20th move in the previous variation, the only difference being that there is no White knight on e4 (and no Black knight on b6). And this difference is vital, as White cannot now open up the Black king by

sacrificing his e4-knight on f6, and he should lose, indeed he should resign.

17...Nc4!

This is stronger than 17...Na4, which allows White to equalize after 18. Nxa4 Qxa4 19. Qxa4 Rxa4 20. e5. But in order to be certain that Black was better, I had to foresee and evaluate correctly the position six moves ahead, after 23...Nc5 (as in the game).

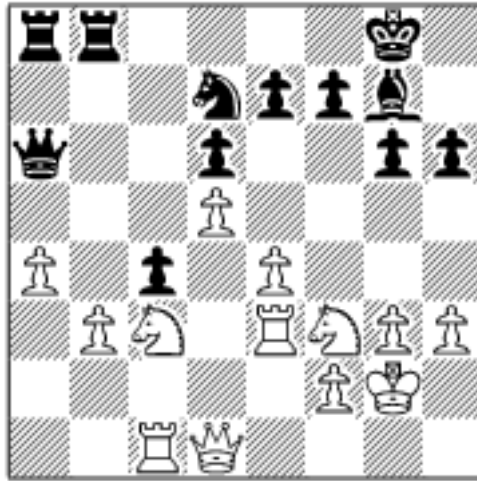
18. b3 Nxe3+ 19. Rxe3 Nd7

Opening the diagonal for the bishop. Note that, were it not for the Black pawn on h6, 19...Bh6 would win.

20. a4

White is ready to block the queenside by 21. Nb5 followed by 22. Nd2. Black's reply is a must.

20...c4!



21. Nb5

This looks very attractive because of the double threat: to recapture on c4 with the rook and to win the Exchange after Nc7.

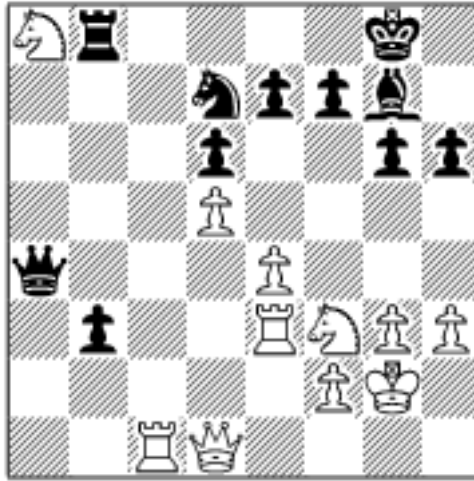
Another possible move is 21. bxc4, which leads to a substantial positional advantage for Black. He

would eventually win the a-pawn and exerts strong pressure on the e-pawn; besides, the White king is not as safe as Black's. But the various endings—virtually all of them—also do not promise White much hope of an early draw here.

As mentioned above, I have analyzed these types of endings, with a 5 v. 5 pawn structure, in great detail—as far as rook v. rook endings, and sometimes even as far as pawn endings, and I have discovered that Black often has good winning chances. Usually, the more pieces left on the board, the more difficult the job facing White. On my scale this would evaluate the position after 21. bxc4 as [2.5], with a predicted result of 5 wins for Black and 5 draws out of ten games.

White's 21st move 21. Nb5 changes this evaluation further in Black's favor: [2.0], but with a sharper distribution of possible results: seven wins for Black, two draws, but also—one win for White.

21...cxb3! 22. Nc7 Qxa4 23. Nxa8

**23...Nc5**

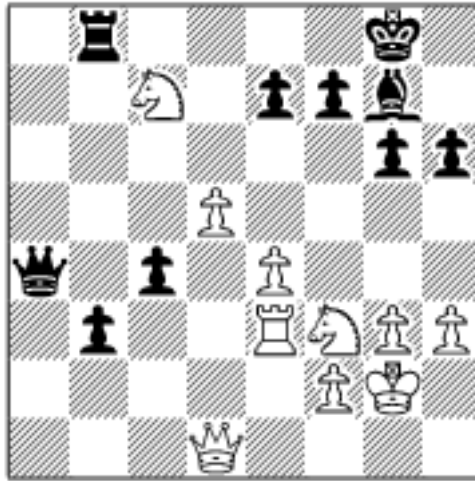
Another alternative, which I considered before making my 17th move as well as after White's 23rd, is 23...b2. At first I thought that after 24. Qxa4 bxc1=Q 25. Qxd7 Rxa8 26. Qxe7 Ra2 (threatening to take the White rook) 27. Re1 Qb2 28. Rf1 Black

could play for a win without any risk of losing. Still, I thought that my winning chances here would be poorer than after another move planned in advance, 23...Nc5. Then, however, I found that White could obtain better chances after 23...b2? by 24. Rc8+! Rxc8 25. Qxa4 b1=Q 26. Qxd7 Rxa8 27. Qxe7. The difference compared with the previous variation is that the Black queen is at b1 instead of c1, and because of this 27...Ra2 does not gain a tempo.

After this discovery I checked again my pre-planned 23...Nc5, and made it with great confidence.

Now ... b3-b2 is a serious threat, and thus 24. Nc7 does not promise White anything. But otherwise Black threatens to capture the knight on a8, and with a pawn—but what a pawn—for the Exchange, he should win the game without great trouble. White found the best reply.

24. Rxc5! dxc5 25. Nc7 c4!

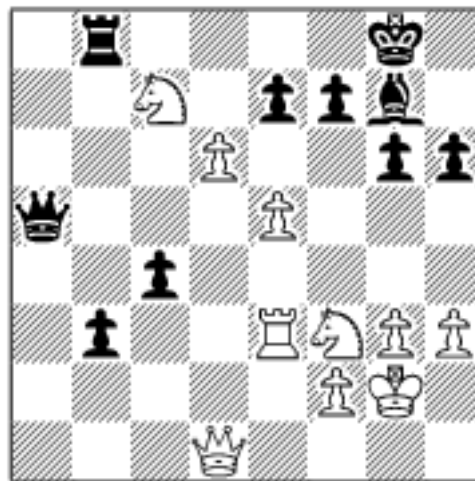


On 25...Qa5? White would happily give back the piece: 26. Rxb3 Rxb3 27. Qxb3 Qxc7 28. Nd2, with a good game. Black preferred, correctly, to preserve his two connected pawns, rather than to regain the piece.

26. e5!

White cuts off the Black bishop from the queenside, and simultaneously prepares to create his own passed pawn.

26...Qa5 27. d6



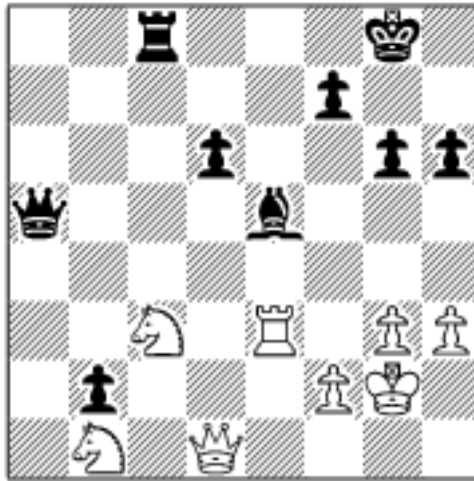
27...b2!

If 27...c3, then White's attack after 28. dxe7 could become very dangerous, e.g. 28...c2 29. Qd8+ Rxd8 30. exd8=Q+ Kh7 31. Rxb3 c1=Q 32. Rb8, or 28...Qxc7 29. Qd6 Qc8 30. Rxc3. The text move 27...b2 creates an immediate threat (of

queening), but it also separates the passed pawns, and allows White to stop them by blockade.

28. Qb1?!

White's best try is 28. Nd2 c3 (28...exd6!?) 29. Nb1 (29. Nc4 Qc5) 29...Bxe5 30. Nd5 exd6 31. Ndxc3 Rc8.



Analysis: after 31...Rc8

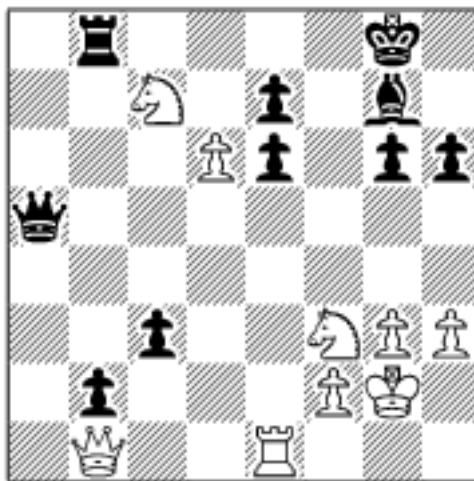
Black is certainly much better, but White's defenses aren't yet exhausted.

28...c3 29. e6

This attack should fail, but other attempts to escape are also futile, e.g. 29. Nd4

exd6 or 29. Ne1 Bxe5.

29...fxe6 30. Re1



30...exd6?!

Black's desire to eliminate the White d-pawn, so dangerous just recently, is psychologically fully understandable, but it prolongs the fight. 30...Qf5 wins immediately.

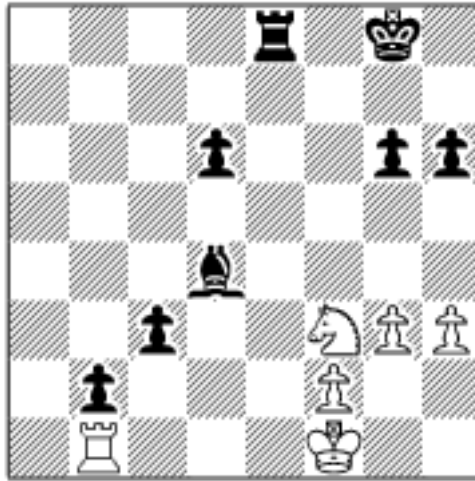
31. Nxe6 Qf5 32. Ned4

I overlooked this move, which takes control of the c2-square—otherwise, I would certainly have played 30...Qf5. Still, Black should win without any great difficulty.

32...Qxb1 33. Rxb1 Re8 34. Kf1

If 34. Nc2, Black continues 34...Re2 35. Nfe1 d5 36. Kf1 Rd2, and the three connected passed pawns should eventually break through White's blockade and win.

34...Bxd4!

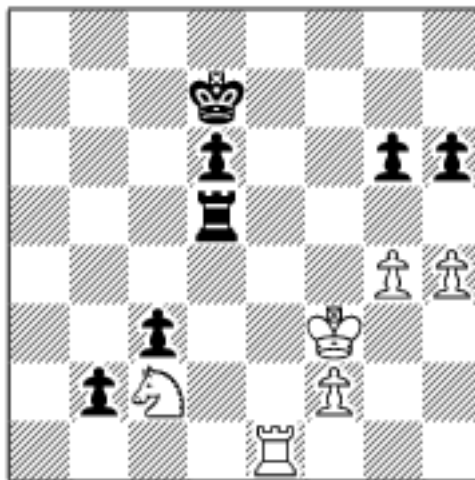


Now White was threatening an effective blockade: Nc2 and Ne1–d3. Therefore Black gives up the bishop, which has become less important with his passed pawns also on dark squares.

35. Nxd4 Re5 36. Kg2 Re4 37. Nc2 Kf7 38. Kf3 Re5 39. h4 Kf6

In time pressure, Black tries to reach the control at move 40.

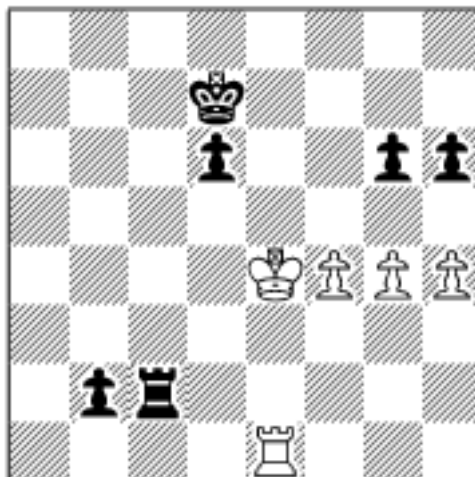
40. Rd1 Ke6 41. g4 Rd5 42. Re1+ Kd7



Black's king goes to support his passed pawns. The game is over.

43. Na3 Rd3+ 44. Ke4 Rd2 45. f4 c2 46. Nxc2 Rxc2

This rook ending is an easy win for Black.



47. Rb1 Ke6 48. h5 gxh5 49. gxh5 Kf6 50. Kd5 Kf5 51. Kxd6 Kxf4, White resigns.

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