

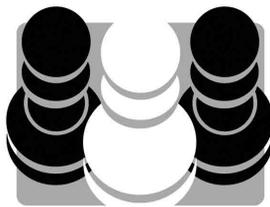
Grandmaster Repertoire

The Pirc Defence

By

Mihail Marin

*To Mariya
And to my Kumas, of course*



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Preface

My love story with the Pirc Defence started a long time ago, while still a teenager. For reasons soon to be revealed, though, it remained at a platonic level for many years.

In 1983 my father gave me Guerman Samoilovich Fridshtein's *Zaschita Pirtsu-Ufimtseva*, which captivated me immediately, possibly due to its pleasant green cover. I studied it carefully and even filled a 48-page maths notebook with my analysis. When everything was done I showed my father (a second category player) what I considered my most spectacular finding in one of the main lines. He was delighted, as everything started with a knight sacrifice on b2, but as we went along the main line of the analysis I suddenly realized that I had not counted the pieces in the final position very well: Black was still a piece down!

I was so disappointed and ashamed (I did not say a single word to my father about it) that I immediately gave up the plan of playing the Pirc. But for many years my father was convinced I was playing "Guerman" (this is how we had baptized the opening, according to the author's name), when in fact I had switched to the Sicilian Paulsen.

The second important moment in this story occurred in the autumn of 1996. For two years I had been playing the Sicilian Dragon almost exclusively, but then Kasparov spoiled it all by using this opening (and one of my novelties in the game he won) during the match with Anand. It immediately became clear that the Dragon was going to become fashionable, ceasing to be *my* opening and forcing me to keep pace with the latest theoretical developments, which has never been my favourite hobby.

I had little more than a month to prepare for the Romanian Championship and definitely needed a new opening against 1.e4, as this was the main move of most of my opponents. In the meantime I had been fooling around with the Caro-Kann a bit, but that was obviously not *my* opening. I asked my friend and trainer IM Vali Stoica for advice and a few hours later he came up with the following idea: "Bob, you are skilled in pawn play. Why not try the Pirc?"

I became so addicted to this idea (after all, the Dragon constellation was still there, pawns from the d-file to the h-file) that at the championship I started all my games with 1...d6, even in the two games when my opponents played 1.d4 and 1.♘f3. And then nearly a whole decade followed in which I played the Pirc almost exclusively. I temporarily gave up the Pirc after a painful loss to Fressinet in 2004 (see page 221), but three years later I reclaimed the moral right to play it at least occasionally after using it to defeat the same opponent in the last round of a blitz super-tournament. Nowadays my repertoire is quite ample, but if I feel too lazy or tired to prepare I just choose the Pirc: the opening I can play just by reflex.

Based on my accumulated experience over the years, I will now give a general description of this opening.

The Pirc is mainly a positional weapon, but the strategic tension that gradually accumulates often leads to critical moments when tactical or dynamic decisions are necessary. In other words, it is an opening that suits players with a balanced (or complete) style.

Over the years I have developed the useful habit of constantly analysing my own games, looking for improvements – mainly in the cases when I was in danger, but not only then. The Pirc is flexible enough to allow me to vary a little from one game to the next, thus avoiding my opponents' specific preparation.

After a few years I had accumulated some slight doubts regarding certain lines I had played. It was with great joy that I received Nunn and McNab's *The Ultimate Pirc* as a present from my friend Ari Ziegler, and I immediately started looking for their recommendations in the positions that were bugging me. Much to my surprise, in all six cases I found my own games in the main lines – precisely the games in which I had felt unsure at certain moments!

This was very flattering, of course. It meant that my knowledge, understanding and games were good enough to build a book upon, but at the same time I understood that I had to do the new analytical work myself in order to keep the opening in good shape; hard and rewarding work at the same time.

The repertoire examined in this book is the fruit of many years of refining my analysis, but I advise the reader to follow my own method of continuous improvement. I believe that the verbal comments to all the critical lines will serve as a guideline.

Dieter Nisipeanu, a natural enemy of the Pirc, once confessed to me his personal view. This opening gives White a false impression of safety, increasing the risk of becoming careless or over-optimistic in the middlegame. Indeed, Black is cramped in the first phase of the game, but his strategic and dynamic resources are greater than one might think at a brief glance. But the reverse of the medal is that Black should believe in his position and his chances of turning the tables at White's first inaccuracy.

A few years ago I published a pair of ChessBase DVDs containing a Pirc repertoire for Black. For this book I had two main reasons for analysing different lines against White's main systems. First of all, I thought that this was the correct approach anyway. Secondly, and more importantly, I also wanted to deepen and widen my own knowledge of my favourite opening.

The general structure of the book contains the positional lines with 4.♘f3 (Chapters 1 to 4), the aggressive lines with 4.f4 and 4.♗e3 (Chapters 5 to 10), and assorted less topical systems (Chapters 11 to 17). Before launching into these chapters I have placed a strategic introduction, explaining in some detail the most typical structures of the Pirc.

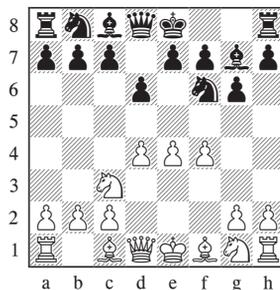
As a final piece of advice, I would ask you to be good to my old love, as she will surely repay you well!

Mihail Marin

Bucharest, September 2017

Chapter 5

Austrian Attack



5th & 6th Move Alternatives

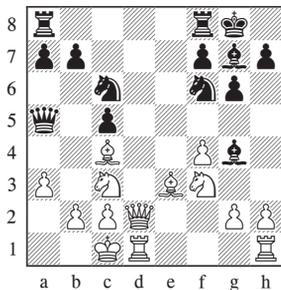
Variation Index

1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♗c3 g6 4.f4

4...♙g7

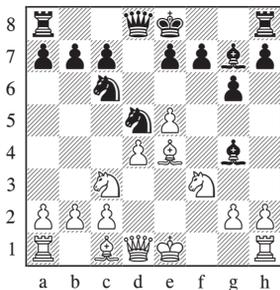
A) 5.e5	111
B) 5.a3 0-0 6.♗f3 c5!? 7.dxc5 ♖a5 8.b4 ♖c7	115
B1) 9.e5	116
B2) 9.♙d2	119
C) 5.♙d3 ♗c6	122
C1) 6.e5	122
C2) 6.♗f3	125
D) 5.♗f3 c5	126
D1) 6.d5	127
D2) 6.♙e2	130

A) note to 11.♙b1



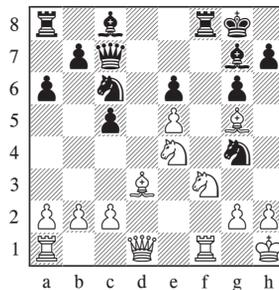
14...b5!N

C1) after 9.♙e4



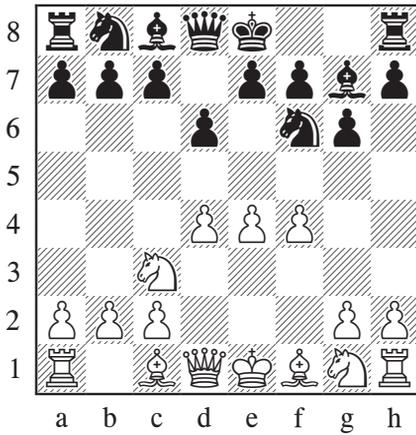
9...♗xc3!N

D1) after 14.♗c4



14...♙d7!N

1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 g6 4.f4 ♕g7



From the first moment I became interested in the Pirc Defence, I have always thought that the Austrian Attack is the most challenging system. White builds up a massive pawn centre, creating the positional threat of e4-e5, which in many cases leaves Black with a cramped position and offers White chances for a direct attack against the king.

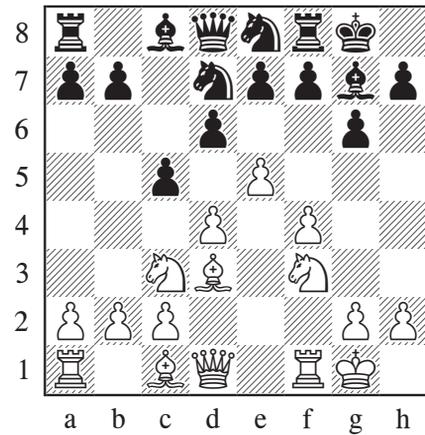
Black's thematic break in the centre with ...e7-e5 is more problematic than in other systems, so he frequently resorts to ...c7-c5. After the centre stabilizes with d4-d5, White can consider the consistent attack based on ♖e1-h4, f4-f5, ♕h6 and ♗g5.

The only drawback of this system is that it slightly delays White's development, allowing Black to fight against the centre by dynamic means. White received a serious warning about the dangers awaiting him if he treats the centre superficially in one of the first recorded games with the Pirc Defence:

5.♗f3 0-0 6.♕d3 ♗bd7 7.e5 ♗e8 8.0-0 c5

White has not sustained his initial aggression with h2-h4, or e5-e6 followed by h2-h4, and Black has managed to undermine the centre very effectively. The next two moves are obvious concessions, giving up the shaky

centre without a fight and activating the black knights.



9.exd6 ♗xd6 10.dxc5 ♗xc5

With great play for Black in Weiss – Paulsen, Nuremberg 1883.

Over the years I have systematically refrained from embarking on theoretical discussions in what is objectively the main line, 5...c5. My wish to avoid forced lines was backed up by my excellent results in the lines 5...0-0 6.♕d3 ♗a6 followed by ...c5, and 6.♕e3 b6, but over time I became aware that refraining from 5...c5 is equivalent to giving up hope of taking advantage of White's delayed development.

When writing this book I finally took the bull by its horns and made the early central break our repertoire line.

Returning to the position after 4...♕g7, White has a choice between the comparatively rare A) 5.e5, B) 5.a3 and C) 5.♕d3, and the absolute main line D) 5.♗f3, which is introduced towards the end of this chapter before being examined further in the next two chapters.

Now and at later branching points I have covered the minor and unpopular lines in lesser detail, reserving space, time and energy for the critical variations.

A) 5.e5

Due to White's completely undeveloped kingside, this is premature. After the insertion of 5.♘f3 0-0 the early central break is far more consistent, for two main reasons – ♘f3 is useful in offering White attacking chances after h2-h4, and the black king may become a target. But under the current circumstances Black has little to fear.

5...♘fd7

The most flexible answer, preparing to undermine the centre with ...c5.

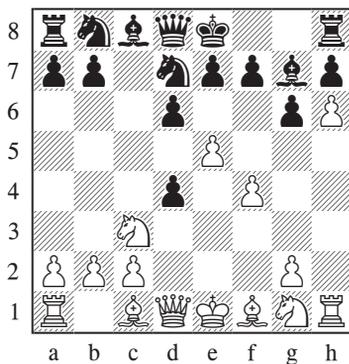
6.♘f3

White does not achieve anything positive with:

6.h4 c5 7.h5 cxd4 8.h6

Hoping to force ...♙f8.

8.♙xd4 loses a pawn without any compensation: 8...dxe5 9.♙f2 ♘c6 10.hxg6 hxg6 11.♙xh8† ♙xh8♣ Black had an extra pawn and normal development in Tredup – Oetzel, Krumpa 1972.



8...♙xe5!

The best solution to the global tension. Black eliminates an important pawn, avoiding the opening of the h-file by hxg7 at the same time.

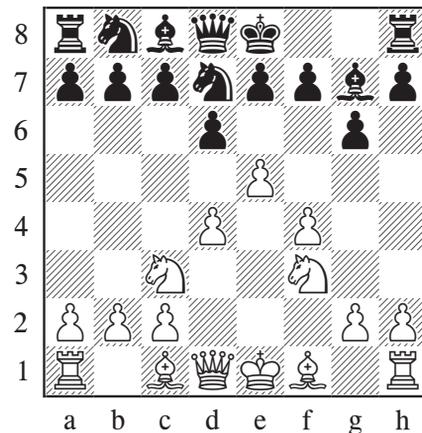
9.fxg5 dxc3 10.exd6

In Napoli – V. Moskalenko, Barcelona 2012, Black played 10...♙a5, retaining an

advantage, but I would opt for the more flexible developing move:

10...♘c6N♣

10...0-0N♣ is also strong. With all his pieces on the first rank, White has no chances to exploit the weakness of the g7-square, so Black can safely enjoy his material advantage.



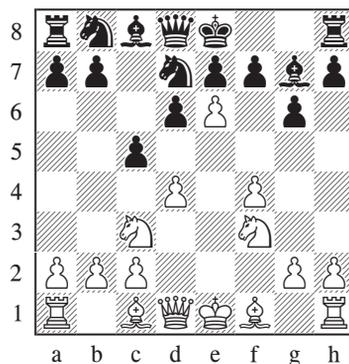
6...c5

Attacking the enemy pawn chain at its base, as recommended by Nimzowitsch.

7.exd6

White tries to stabilize the position and prove that the knight's retreat was a mere loss of time, since under the changed circumstances it will have to return to f6. But after the e5-pawn vanishes, the weakness of the e4-square becomes a telling factor. White has two main alternatives: a) 7.e6 and b) 7.dxc5.

a) 7.e6



This gives up the vulnerable pawn to weaken Black's structure in the king's neighbourhood, but at the same time it clears the diagonal for the g7-bishop.

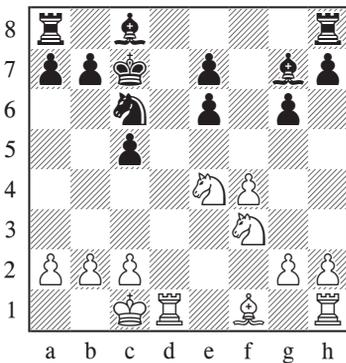
7...fxe6 8.♔e3

A new try by a top-level grandmaster to bring some fresh life to the position.

The old line went 8.♘g5 ♖f6 9.dxc5 ♘c6, with comfortable development. Black's more numerous pawn islands are compensated for by White's slight delay in development and the weaknesses left behind by his advancing pawns. A classical game between two Soviet grandmasters continued: 10.♙c4 Forcing Black to release the tension and weaken the e5-square. 10...d5 11.♙b5 d4 12.♙xc6† bxc6 13.♘e2 ♖a5† 14.♗d2 ♗xc5 15.♘xd4 ♗d5= Black's structure looks even more shattered than before, but the queen's activity, the bishop pair and the possibility of obtaining activity in the centre with either ...e5 or ...c5 offered Black entirely adequate play in Vasiukov – Tsherkovsky, Leningrad 1974.

8...♘c6 9.dxc5 ♘xc5 10.♙xc5 dxc5 11.♗xd8† ♘xd8 12.0-0-0† ♘c7 13.♘e4

13.♘b5† is harmless due to 13...♙b8, planning ...a6 and ...b5, when White does not have the resources to trouble the enemy king.



In Giri – Ivanchuk, Leon 2013, Black could have safely retained his extra pawn with:

13...b6N 14.♙c4 ♖f8 15.g3 e5†

b) 7.dxc5

This is best met with the asymmetric:

7...dxe5

Fighting against White's main trump, his space advantage in the centre.

8.fxe5

White's hopes of depriving Black of the right to castle with 8.♘xe5 ♘xe5 9.♗xd8† are illusory due to 8...0-0!†, as played in a few games. Black will retrieve the c5-pawn soon, most likely with ...♗a5, with free development and active play.

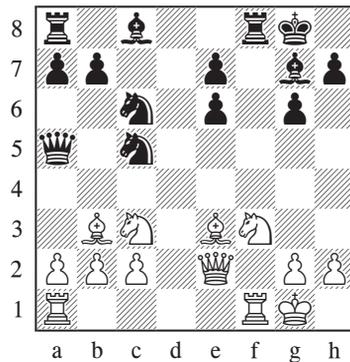
8...0-0 9.e6

The pawn was doomed anyway, so White uses it to provoke some positional damage.

9...fxe6 10.♙c4 ♘xc5 11.♗e2 ♘c6 12.♙e3 ♗b6 13.♙b3

Shielding the b2-pawn and threatening ♘a4.

13...♗a5 14.0-0



14...♘xb3

14...b6N, preparing ...♙a6, is a worthwhile alternative. After 15.♘b5 ♙xb2 followed by ...♙g7, White has compensation for the pawns but no real threats.

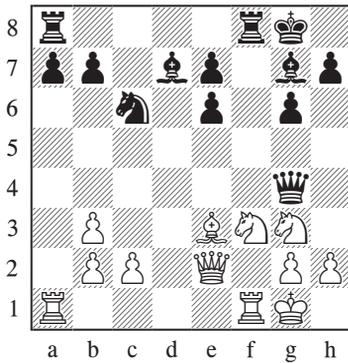
15.axb3 ♗h5!N

In the absence of White's king's bishop, the queen belongs on the light squares. On h5 it is not only safe, but also restricts White's attacking possibilities. The passive 15...♗c7, played in Bronstein – Tringov, Reykjavik 1974, could have caused Black some trouble in finding a safe square for the queen after 16.♘b5N.

16. ♖e4

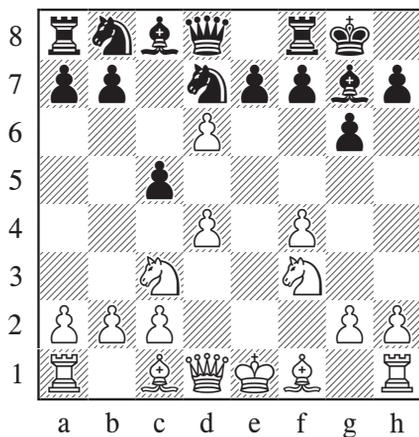
The only way to harass Her Majesty.

16... ♗d7 17. ♖g3 ♜g4=



Once again, White's compensation for the pawn due to his better structure is something that Black can perfectly well live with. One important aspect is that 18. ♞a4 fails to bother the queen, since after 18... ♖b4 there is no time for c2-c3 as the rook is hanging. And if 19. ♞xa7 ♞xa7 20. ♗xa7 ♖d5+ Black has a lot of activity.

7...0-0



8. ♗e3

White does better to develop, as pawn-grabbing offers Black the initiative:

8.dxe7? ♜xe7+ 9. ♗e2 cxd4+

Black is better developed and his d-pawn

ensures him a space advantage. Eliminating it turns a bad position into a worse one by opening the d-file for the enemy rook:

10. ♖xd4? ♖b6 11. ♖cb5 ♞d8 12. c3 a6 13. ♖a3 ♖c6 14. ♖ac2 ♗f5 15. ♖f1

15.0-0 ♗xc2 16. ♜xc2 ♗xd4+ wins the bishop on e2.

15... ♗xc2 16. ♜xc2 ♖xd4 17. cxd4 ♞ac8+

Black had a decisive initiative along the open files in Rakic – Petronic, Cetinje 1993.

8...exd6

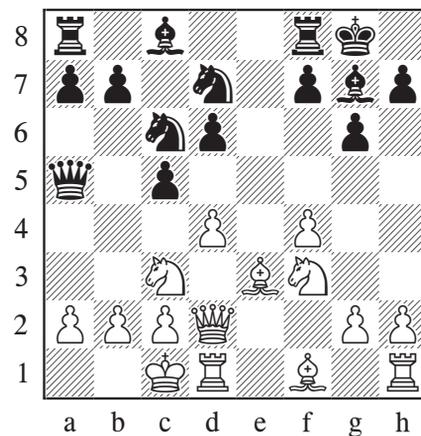
Returning the game to a normal course of development.

9. ♜d2 ♖c6 10.0-0-0

This is not only the fastest way of getting the king away from the centre, but also the relatively best way of defending b2. The plan of castling short is slow, allowing Black to obtain a strong initiative with ... ♜b6 followed by ... ♞e8 and ... ♖f6.

10... ♜a5

Not only putting pressure on the a2-pawn, but also defending the c5-pawn in order to allow ... ♖f6.



11. ♖b1

11.a3

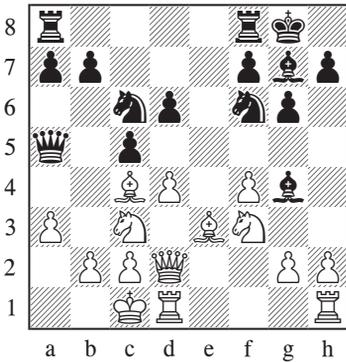
This does not create problems either.

11...♘f6 12.♙c4

Or if 12.♘b5 ♜xd2† 13.♞xd2 ♘e4N
14.♞d1 ♙f5 with comfortable play.

12...♙g4

Increasing the pressure on the d4-pawn and more or less forcing White to open the d-file.



13.dxc5

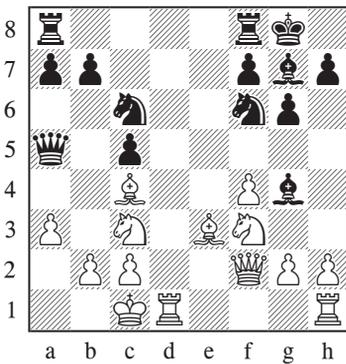
13.d5 ♘e7 followed by ...a6 and ...b5 will soon endanger not only the white king, but also the d5-pawn.

13...dxc5

Black has active play and it is already White who needs to be careful, but in Schaefer – Schlemmer, Germany 1993, he was not:

14.♞f2

However, Black missed his chance to start a dangerous attack:

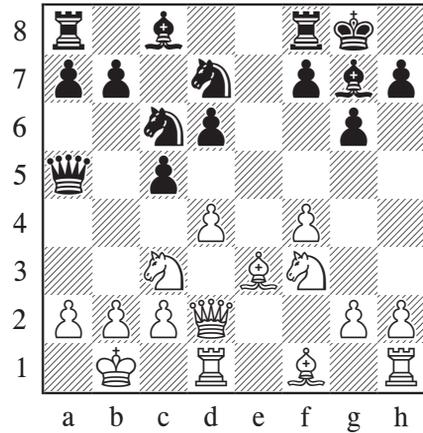


14...b5!N 15.♙xb5

15.♘b5 ♞ab8 is no better, for if 16.♙d2 Black has 16...♘e4+ winning material.

15...♘e4 16.♘xe4 ♜xb5 17.c3 ♘a5

Followed by ...♙f5, with nasty threats.



11...♘f6 12.h3

Preventing ...♙g4.

12...♞e8 13.♙c4N

Only in part an active move. White prepares to defend his king with ♙b3.

Under the present circumstances, the familiar manoeuvre 13.♘b5?, as played in A. Toma – Sfarlog, Predeal 2006, should have led to disaster after 13...♘b4!N 14.a3 ♘e4 15.♞e1 a6†, when many white pieces, including the king, are vulnerable.

13...♙f5 14.♙b3

14.g4 can be met in many ways, but the simplest is 14...cxd4 15.♘xd4 ♘e4 16.♘xe4 ♙xe4 17.♞h2 d5, with a comfortable version of the isolani due to Black's control over the e4-square.

14...c4!

The fastest way of achieving counterplay. At the cost of one pawn Black clears the c-file and gains a tempo for advancing his b-pawn.

14...b5 would lose the c5-pawn with unclear consequences.

15.♙xc4

preferred to analyse a variation that suits the spirit of the main lines more faithfully.

7.dxc5 ♖a5 8.b4

The only way to give meaning to 6.a3. Otherwise White would be practically a tempo down with respect to the normal lines.

8...♞c7

Black pins the c5-pawn but, as we shall see, regaining the pawn will require a certain accuracy. White is underdeveloped, but Black's queen, having already spent two tempos, is likely to be exposed, so play may be expected to become rather sharp.

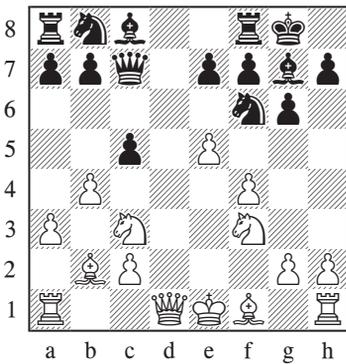
White can choose between **B1) 9.e5** and **B2) 9.♙d2**.

9.♙b2

This simplifies Black's task.

9...dxc5 10.e5

In Veys – Solozhenkin, Vaujany 2013, Black should not have refrained from:



10...♞d8!N 11.exf6!?

The only way to keep some life in the position.

11.♞c1 allows Black to solve his development problems with natural moves: 11...♘d5 12.♙xd5 ♞xd5 13.♞e3 ♙f5=

11...♞xd1† 12.♞xd1 exf6 13.♙d5 ♞d7 14.♙xf6†

Otherwise Black would step away either with his king (...♔h8) or his queen (...♞e8† or

...♞a4), leaving White with just reasonable compensation for the queen.

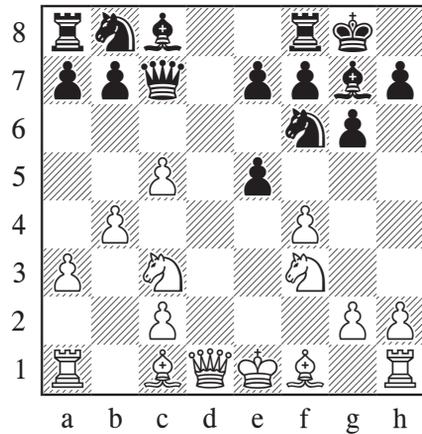
14...♙xf6 15.♞xd7 ♙xd7 16.♙xf6 ♙xf6 17.bxc5 ♙e6=

Black will retrieve the pawn soon, with perfect equality.

B1) 9.e5

This counter-break secures White's queenside space advantage, but gives up the centre.

9...dxe5



10.fxe5

The knight jump to b5 needs investigating at practically every step:

10.♞b5 ♞d7!N

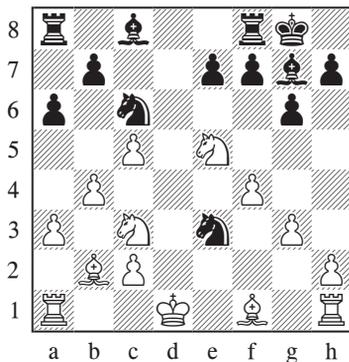
Threatening to deprive White of the right to castle.

10...♞c6?! 11.♙xe5 ♞e4† 12.♞e2 ♞xe2† 13.♙xe2 ♙c6 14.♙b2 ♙d5 15.g3± allowed White to consolidate his extra pawn in Trent – Romanov, Chalkidiki 2003.

White has a choice now:

a) 11.♙xe5 ♞xd1† 12.♙xd1 ♙c6 13.♙b2 13.♙xc6? bxc6 14.♙d4 ♙g4+ wins material.

13...♙d5 14.g3 a6 15.♙c3 ♙e3†



16.♔c1

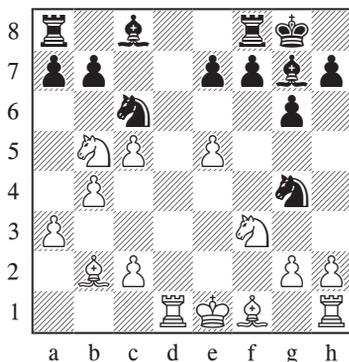
16.♔d2 fights against the intruding knight, but exposes the king, allowing Black to gain a tempo for developing his rook: 16...♞xf1† 17.♖hx1 ♜xe5 18.fxe5 ♙h3 19.♖fe1 ♞fd8† Black holds the initiative due to White's poor coordination.

16...♙xe5 17.fxe5 ♙f5

Black will retrieve the pawn soon, and his initiative compensates for White's bishop pair.

b) 11.fxe5 ♜g4 12.♙b2 ♚xd1† 13.♖xd1 ♜c6

White has maintained the right to castle, but his e5-pawn is doomed.



14.♜c7

Trying to reactivate the errant knight.

14...♖b8 15.♜d5 ♙e6 16.h3

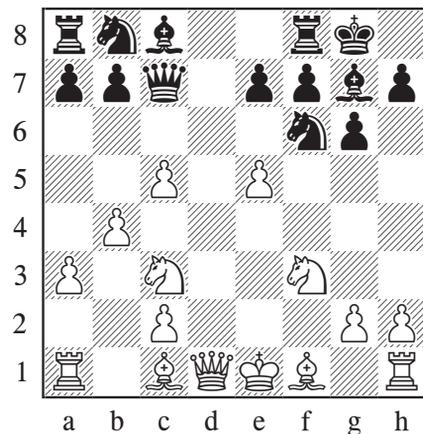
16.♙b5 fails to save the e5-pawn: 16...♙xd5 17.♖xd5 e6 18.♞d7 ♜cx5=

16...♜cx5 17.♜xe5 ♜xe5 18.♜xe7† ♔h8

Threatening ...♖fe8 with fatal consequences due to the X-ray pressure along the e-file.

19.♙e2 ♜f3† 20.♙xf3 ♙xb2

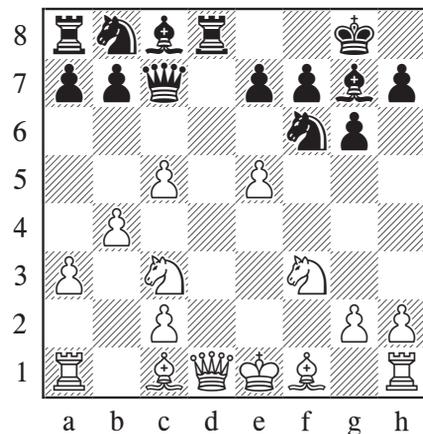
Because of the renewed threat of ...♖fe8, Black regains the pawn with approximate equality in a still complicated position.



10...♞d8

As in a previous line, it is useful to control the d-file before choosing a square for the knight.

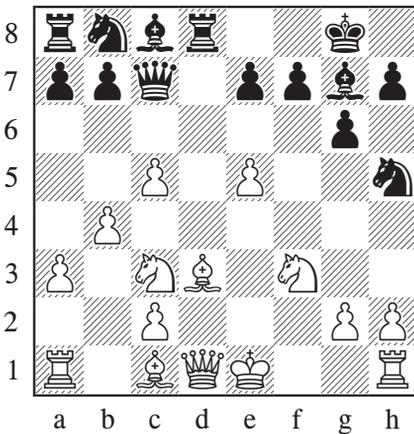
10...♜g4 11.♜d5 ♚d7 12.♙f4 ♜c6 13.♙b5± was not entirely satisfactory for Black in Slingerland – De Wit, Haarlem 2011.



11.♙d3 ♜h5

The knight will be temporarily passive, but it prevents ♖f4 and the knight would otherwise find itself on an unfavourable path.

For instance: 11...♗g4 12.♘b5 ♔d7 13.♚e2 a6 14.h3 axb5 (14...♗h6 15.♘bd4± leaves Black too passive) 15.hxg4 ♘c6 16.♙b2± Although the position is not entirely clear, Black's compensation for the pawn is not obvious to me.



12.♘b5

Now is the best moment for the knight jump.

12.0-0 ♘c6

This renders ♘b5 ineffective in view of ...♚b8.

13.♙b2 ♗g4

Black still has to be careful: 13...♗xe5? 14.♘b5! ♚b8 15.♙xe5 ♙xe5 16.♗xe5 ♚xe5 17.♚f3 ♙e6 18.♖ae1+- sees White gain an overwhelming initiative.

14.e6

White willingly gives away the doomed pawn in order to reduce Black's activity.

14...♙xe6 15.♘b5 ♚f4 16.♙xg7 ♘xg7=

Black has little to complain about.

12...♚d7

The queen is forced to block the bishop's development, but Black will soon gain a

tempo with ...a6, helping him to regain his coordination.

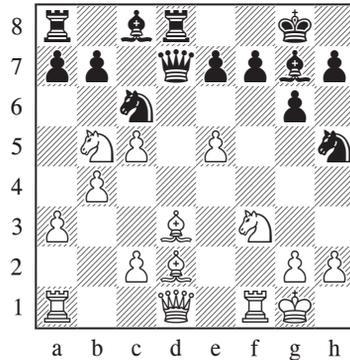
13.0-0 ♘c6 14.♚e1

The best way to defend the pawn, since 14.♙b2 a6 15.♗c3 ♗f4± allows the activation of the knight from the edge.

The familiar 14.e6 does not work due to 14...♚xe6, and 15.♗c7 is ineffective since the a1-rook is also hanging.

14.♙d2

This demands some accuracy.

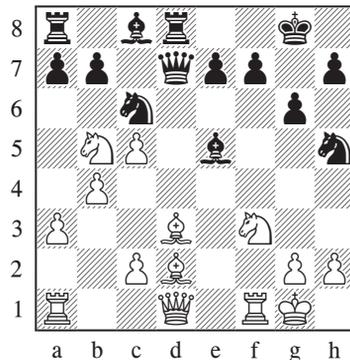


14...♙xe5!

This paradoxical move, giving away the fianchettoed bishop, is the only way to equalize completely. The alternatives are inferior:

14...a6? 15.e6! fx e6 16.♗c3±

14...♗xe5 15.♗xe5 ♙xe5 16.♚f3±



15.♖b1

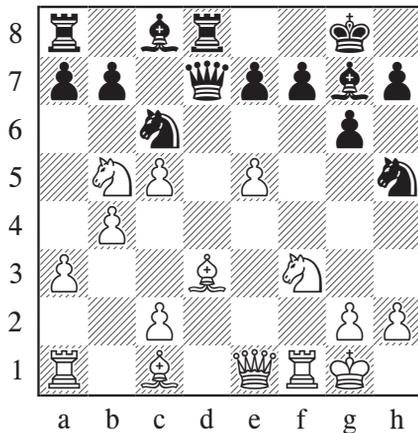
The point is that 15.♗xe5 ♗xe5♞ leaves White's bishops hanging.

15...♙f6 16.♚e1 b6!?:=

The best way to continue developing and to neutralize White's space advantage on the queenside.

17.cxb6 axb6

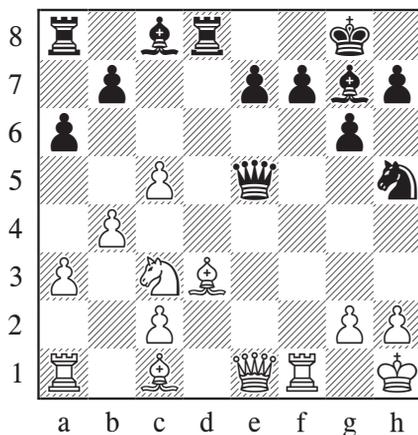
With complex play and mutual chances.



14...a6!

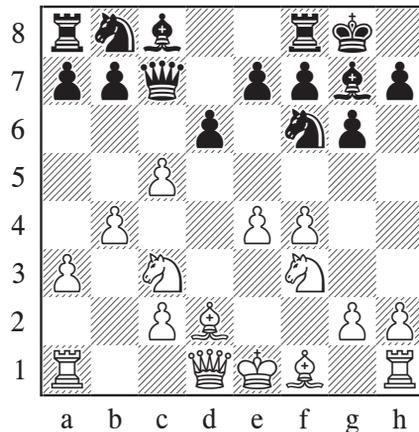
Black needs to make the d4-square available for the queen in order to retrieve the pawn.

15.♗c3 ♗xe5 16.♗xe5 ♚d4† 17.♖h1 ♚xc5=



Chances were even in Genzling – Solodovnichenko, Nancy 2014, though play could turn in either's side favour due to the highly asymmetric structure.

B2) 9.♙d2



This looks less natural than 9.♙b2, mentioned on page 116, but it has the merit of shielding the queen along the d-file.

9...dxc5 10.e5 ♖d8!N

Nevertheless, Black reacts in the same way as after 9.♙b2, even though this already involves a piece sacrifice. This is not the only moment when Black needs to take radical measures.

Normal moves fail to equalize:

10...♗h5 11.♗d5 ♚d7 12.♙e3 ♖d8 13.c4 ♗c6 In Sedina – Gaponenko, Plovdiv 2014, White should have continued her development with 14.♙e2N±, making the h5-knight look miserable.

10...cxb4 is a less auspicious version of the piece sacrifice: 11.♗b5 ♚b6 12.exf6 ♙xf6 13.axb4 ♙xa1 14.♚xa1± Ivanchuk – Gardner, Edmonton 2015.