

Cyrus Lakdawala

The Greatest Attacker in Chess

The Enigmatic Rashid Nezhmetdinov

New In Chess 2022

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Preface

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.

Albert Einstein

What are the most powerful forces in chess?

1. instinct/intuition
2. imagination
3. risk-taking/speculation
4. calculation
5. logic

Rashid Nezhmetdinov's chess embraced every number on the list, except the last one! For decades, many chess players were unfamiliar with his games and much of the chess world has not (yet) caught up with his astonishing creations over the chessboard. Around twelve years ago, a friend of mine mentioned Nezhmetdinov's name. I only had a vague, glimmering recollection that Nezhmetdinov had beaten Tal several times and that he had created an attacking masterpiece against Polugaevsky. That is where my knowledge of him ended. Then over the past few years on social media, I noticed that Nezhmetdinov's name kept getting mentioned more and more, as a steady stream of his games and combinational excerpts began to be posted.

The chess world's gradual introduction to Nezhmetdinov's games is mostly due to the untiring efforts of Nezh super-fan Antonio Radic, also known as the Agadmator, who is by far the most successful chess YouTuber in the world, with a staggering 1,000,000 plus subscribers. Over and over, Antonio's videos displayed Nezhmetdinov's dazzling games, to the point where Nezh, the creator of some of the most imaginative and entertaining games in chess history, is now finally being embraced by a legion of new chess fans. In total, Nezhmetdinov's games attracted more than 17 million views on YouTube and other chess video streams!

So thanks to Antonio, these once barely known gems have emerged from obscurity into full public view. Nezh was not a world champion, nor even a contender, yet his limitless tactical optimism and fiery games ignite our own imagination.

No Reverse Gear Nezh: his style

Nezhmetdinov is the single most unconventional player I have ever known.

Yasser Seirawan

Rashid Nezhmetdinov is a virtuoso of combinational chess.

David Bronstein

How do we develop our unique style? It develops from a combination of influences:

1. our natural stylistic ability
2. the books and players we study, especially in our youth
3. the players we associate with, especially our coaches

Robert Frost wrote a poem called 'Accidentally on Purpose', which is the perfect description of Nezh's style: he joyfully plunged into the dangerous unknown, for the sheer adventure of it. In fact, Nezhmetdinov's nickname was 'No Reverse Gear Nezh' since radical audacity and a refusal to back down were his norms.

My old student professor Joel Sneed once asked Boris Gulko what attracted the grandmaster to chess. Boris answered that he plays chess for the pure adventure of it. I can't find a better description of Nezh's motivation. He craved the thrill; the result of winning, drawing or losing was a secondary, less important factor. Charles Dickens wrote in *Hard Times* of 'the wisdom of the head and the wisdom of the heart.' For Nezh, it was all heart, while the head tended to be rudely ignored!

Conformity to 'realism, correctness and functionality' was the prevailing ethos of Soviet life in Nezhmetdinov's lifetime. In fact, Stalin frowned upon non-functional abstraction in the arts, to the point where he persecuted those who created it. Two examples: Sergei Prokofiev was punished due to his music's atonality, while the chess endgame study composer Arvid Kubbel, Leonid Kubbel's lesser-known brother, was arrested in 1937 and executed. What monstrous crime had he committed to deserve execution? Treason, by mailing some of his composed works to be printed by foreign publications.

In Stalin's era and its lingering after-effect when he died, chess composers were encouraged to create realistic, game-like studies. Abstract studies and helpmates were banned. Although Stalin was gone by 1953, his 'realism, correctness and functionality' zeitgeist pervaded the artistic community's mindset. Botvinnik and Smyslov embraced this stylistic realism, where chess had to be played in sensible, logical fashion.

Nezhmetdinov, Bronstein and Tal – the rebellious teenagers who pushed their ‘parents’, just to see how much they could get away with – represented the anti-realism, anti-correctness style. They delighted in the orderly universe being disrupted by chaos and anomaly. They understood the psychological element of upsetting/confusing the opponent via a steady and deliberate increase in the level of complications, in which all three excelled. Nezhmetdinov’s penchant for caprice was infinite. He was the proto-Tal, and one of the first to introduce a new style of play which was formally unthinkable under the Stalinesque guidelines of correctness in the Soviet Union: he deliberately played to confuse, not worrying if his moves were sound or unsound. Pragmatic, sensible – these were two traits not seen in Nezhmetdinov’s games. His deep insight was this: laws are not much of a deterrent if their enforcement is difficult.

There are two kinds of people in life: those who pick fights and those who avoid them. Nezhmetdinov was clearly in the former category. He blissfully floated upon the current of chaos, always supremely confident that his nearly infallible instincts in irrational positions would carry him safely to the other shore. His deeply held innate belief was: the war is never lost – no matter how far you are down in material or in structure – until your initiative dies.

Nezhmetdinov’s weaknesses were:

1. Playing dull positions, in which his wild imagination rebelled and often pushed him over the cliff with inappropriate attempts to create unsound complications between all the elements in the plain landscape. His aversion to boring positions was well founded. In quiet positions his play gives us the impression of an alpha male gorilla in a tuxedo – something just doesn’t look right.
2. Rejection of a pragmatic, simple path to the win. He often complicated for no good reason (other than love of drama and adventure), when a simple, clear path to the win existed. One curious aspect of Nezhmetdinov’s move choices was that he wasn’t attracted to variations which were easy to find. Instead, he looked for lines which were barely possible. In other words, Nezh was constantly searching for geometric miracles, since the ordinary bored him. He was one of those rare players who were willing to martyr their results for the chance at creating art, which was more important to him than his tournament results.

Rashid’s strength tended to reduce with piece exchanges. Like his Great Romantic predecessors, Nezh was at his best with loads of pieces on the board, with complications at their height.

The evolution of most naturally aggressive players is: barbarism in youth, maturity in adulthood and wisdom and subtlety in old age. Not for Nezhmetdinov, who was faithful to his barbarian stylistic origins from the chess cradle to the chess grave. Nezhmetdinov – like Tal – didn't cling to concepts of sound and unsound based on an objective evaluation. Instead, he went by the metric of successful and unsuccessful. If his unsound sacrifice induced his befuddled opponent to blunder and lose the game, then can we really say that Nezhmetdinov's sacrifice was incorrect? In this book, we observe him orchestrate bluff after bluff, provocation after provocation, and get away with the crime.

Are you really old if your mind still believes it is young? It was this way with Nezh. We all learn from our mistakes – in theory! Most of us begin our chess life aggressively and tend to mellow with the wisdom of caution which aging teaches. Not Nezh, who refused to alter his style from childhood to old age. In open positions, positions with initiative or attack, or positions with combinational potential, Nezhmetdinov had few peers. I suspect that he was an adrenaline addict who craved the exhilaration of the high, only when his position was on the brink – which was pretty much all the time! 'Defence' and 'Nezhmetdinov' tended to be mutually contradictory terms. It has been my observation that a gifted attacker's skill at hunting the enemy king is often in inverse proportion to his prowess at defending his own king. Predictably, Nezhmetdinov was an impatient defender, who preferred to play for swindles, rather than hunker down for a long, grim defensive task. My theory is that Nezh did have the skill sets to play strategically – he just didn't want to! When a dull, maneuvering position was forced upon him, the image of the metal band Megadeth performing Mozart pops into my mind.

The Tal Connection

His games reveal the beauty of chess and make you love in chess not so much the points and high placings, but the wonderful harmony and elegance of this particular world.

Mikhail Tal

An interviewer once asked Tal: 'What was the happiest day of your life?' Now most people would guess that Tal would say that the day he confiscated the world chess title from Botvinnik was that day. But no. Tal said the happiest day of his life was when he lost the 'Evergreen Rashid' game to Nezhmetdinov. Don't worry, the game is in the book. Here is the final position:

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Mikhail Tal

Baku ch-URS 1961



If you asked the question ‘Who do you believe was the most tactically creative player of the 20th century?’ then I’m guessing that most chess players would pick either Alekhine, Bronstein, Tal or Kasparov. Now we have a new potential entry for the top spot: Rashid Nezhmetdinov. Why are so many people irresistibly drawn to Mikhail Tal’s chess games? The spirit of Nezhmetdinov the pirate lived on in his friend’s games. Tal was merely a more powerful extension of Nezhmetdinov. Nezhmetdinov was Tal’s trainer and muse in his successful 1960 bid to dethrone Botvinnik as World Champion. Tal explained that Nezhmetdinov taught him ‘paradox’, taking risk-taking to previously unheard-of levels. Then Tal, his stylistic offspring, displayed to the world the power of this radical new style, when in 1960 he defeated the great Mikhail Botvinnik in a match for the World Championship. If you love Tal’s games, then by default you will automatically love Nezhmetdinov’s.

There were two Tal’s:

1. His younger crazy self.
2. His older, more moderate version.

Number one on the list was probably due to the influence of his trainer, Rashid Nezhmetdinov.

It’s easy to transfer the knowledge of the teacher to the student when their minds are already in perfect stylistic union. When we think of the Magician of Riga, very few of us know that the magician followed a role model who nurtured the magic! When we play over Nezhmetdinov’s games, we become predisposed to a belief in magic and mysticism, just as we do when playing over Tal’s games. If you didn’t know who played the games in this book, you would almost certainly guess that they were

played by a young Tal. So going over Nezhmetdinov's games is almost like finding a secret batch of previously unknown Tal games.

Why didn't Nezhmetdinov become a grandmaster?

If I were to ask you, 'Which player won the RSFSR Championship the most times?', who would you guess? Botvinnik? Smyslov? Tal? Petrosian? Spassky? The correct answer is Rashid Nezhmetdinov, who won it a staggering five times. But then the question arises: how on earth can a player who won the Russian Championship so many times, merely remain an IM for all his life? Why didn't such an insanely strong player ever become a grandmaster? In 2005, Chess Metrics estimated Nezhmetdinov's peak strength at 2660, which, adjusted to rating inflation, would be 2700+ today.

There are many obstacles to earning a title, even if your playing strength meets it. It could be lack of funds, a health issue, or family responsibilities that prevent a player from searching for a title. In Nezh's case it was a simple lack of opportunity. The Soviet authorities, for whatever reason (most likely fear of defection to the free West), refused to grant Nezhmetdinov access to GM norm tournaments which had to be played outside the Soviet Union. Just to give you a picture of how difficult it was to become a GM in the Soviet Union, in the years 1954 to 1959, guess how many Soviet players who lived in the most chess-infused culture in the world earned the GM title? The astonishing answer is three: Boris Spassky in 1955, Viktor Kortchnoi in 1956 and Mikhail Tal in 1957. Not a single player earned the title in years 1954, 1958 or 1959, even though the Soviet Union was loaded with many, many GM-strength players!

Essentially Nezh was offered zero chances of earning the GM title. Opportunity was only given to the rarified elite, outside of which Nezh fell. I find it astonishing that FIDE has yet to award Nezhmetdinov the grandmaster title posthumously and I sincerely hope they will fix this oversight.

The benefits of studying Nezhmetdinov's games

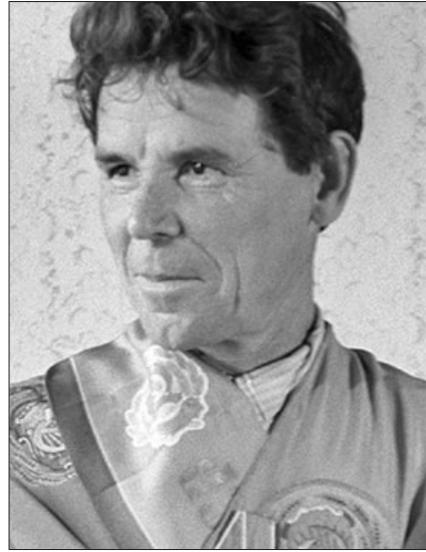
Nobody sees combinations like Rashid Nezhmetdinov.

Mikhail Botvinnik

Besides the fully annotated games in this book, I have inserted a larger than usual number of partial games and fragments with critical positions, since Nezhmetdinov's games, when put together, constitute an encyclopedia of combinations. The game fragments always start at a

critical point where you are asked to look for a combination, critical decision or plan. Both Prince Machiavelli and Cardinal Richelieu would be impressed with the depth of Nezh's level of tactical deceit. Due to Nezh's super-charged tactical style, I have designed the book to also double as a tactics/combinations training manual.

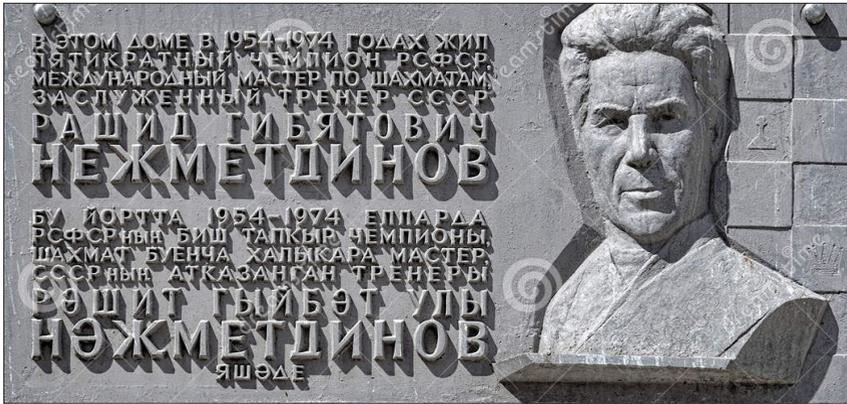
Imitation can inspire the imitator. Playing through Nezhmetdinov's astonishing games may enhance our tactical acuity, expand our imagination, increase our feel for initiative and attack, and enhance our skill in navigating open positions. Essentially, his games may draw out our inner Great Romantic. Hopefully, this will rub off on us as well and our ability to set up tactical snares should improve. We also may push ourselves to cross risk-taking lines we were previously unwilling to traverse. I'm hoping this book will convert Nezh skeptics into Nezh believers.



Many thanks to Ville Matias (Father Vasilios) for his tireless help in researching biographical details, and thanks to Nancy for proofreading.

I hope the reader derives as much joy from playing over Nezhmetdinov's dazzling games, as I did in researching and writing this book. May our inner Nezh awaken!

Cyrus Lakdawala
San Diego, CA, USA
December 2021



A memorial plaque for Nezhmetdinov at the house in Kazan in which he lived from 1954-1974.

CHAPTER 1

A short biography

Rashid Gibyatovich Nezhmetdinov, the most unlikely of chess greats, was born on December 15, 1912 to a crushingly impoverished family in Aktubinsk, a Tatar backwater town located a million miles away from any major Soviet chess center. Nezhmetdinov's early youth was a time of massive civil unrest stemming from the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, and also a period of widespread famine. His life was punctuated with immense deprivation, loss, trauma and suffering, starting with the death of his parents. By age four, he was shipped off to an orphanage in Kazan. His older brother Kavi took Rashid in for a while, until lack of food forced Rashid back to the orphanage.

Then, just like Beth Harmon, the fictional orphan chess genius from the Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*, young Rashid accidentally found chess and was instantly drawn to it, even before he knew how the pieces moved. One day at age 11, Rashid found a scrap of a chess magazine page on the floor with 'unintelligible figures and signs on it while I was in the middle of a game of hide-and-peek.' The paper he found was a chess column from *Smena* magazine, which was in Russian, a language Rashid didn't even speak yet. That evening Rashid obsessed over the secret code within and was determined to crack it. On the page, the rules of chess were demonstrated. He learned the game and, from that point to his death, was hooked to the point of obsession.

A few days later he went to a local chess club meeting. Young Rashid watched respectfully while absorbing and learning. After a period of observation, he summoned the courage to ask an adult to play a game. Nezh won his very first chess game, as did Capablanca from watching his father play a friend. A player named Samsonov immediately spotted great potential in the young boy, who was then immediately accepted into the club as a full-fledged member. Later Rashid discovered another hidden talent in checkers, which he jokingly referred to as 'rook endings'. Just to give you a picture of his immense natural ability, in 1949, the Russian Checkers Semifinals Championship just happened to be held in Kazan. Rashid, although not having played checkers since 1934, decided as a lark to observe the tournament as a spectator. Then fate intervened when one of the tournament's participants pulled a no-show. Nezhmetdinov was offered the opportunity to enter the tournament to

take the AWOL participant's place. Keep in mind that he hadn't played or studied checkers for 15 years! Rashid created a sensation by winning every game of the tournament! This incredible result qualified him for entry into the finals of the Russian Checkers Championship. Then another shocker: the complete unknown achieved a towering second place in the championship!

Let's go back to 1927, which was an explosive year for Rashid, who competed in his first chess tournament in the city Championship of Pioneers. The unknown player shocked the hell out of the locals when he crushed the opposition, sweeping all 15 games. In January of 1928, he took second place in the Kazan Championship. In July, he won the Region of Autonomous Republics Championship. By October he was invited to the elite RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) Championship in Moscow, which was regarded as the Russian Championship.

Nezhmetdinov was a slow developer of his true talent in comparison to most other top players. In 1936 he met some of the top players of the Soviet Union in Rostov-on-Don: Ufimtsev, Dubinin, Kopayev, Grechkin, Bastrikov, and to his shock, lost most of his games, failing to even place in the top 10. That was when he realized that no matter how immense his natural ability, he would never be able to compete with the elite players of his day without intensive study. In the past, checkers had leached away some of Rashid's study time and in some periods he had spent an entire year or more away from chess study. So he resolved to set aside checkers and immerse himself into chess (although, as mentioned above, Nezh briefly broke his promise in 1949). The only other great player I can think of who excelled at both chess and checkers is Vasily Ivanchuk.

In 1937, Nezhmetdinov led Kazan in matches against Stalingrad, Saratov and Kuibyshev, scoring 10 points out of 12. In July 1938 he played in the strongest tournament yet, the RSFSR Championship. Participants included future World Champion Vasily Smyslov, Ufimtsev and Stohlberg. Nezhmetdinov surged to an early lead. Then came crushing disappointment when he collapsed in the end from physical and mental fatigue, finishing second.

With intense introspection, Rashid analyzed his weaknesses:

1. Lack of physical stamina.
2. 'Feeble' play with the black pieces, especially in the openings, and a narrowness in his opening repertoire, making him an easy target for his opponents' preparations. Today we all play our openings with the efficiency of automatons. In Nezh's day the opening was still a place of contemplation. So he vowed to be better prepared with intensive home preparation in the opening.

3. Nezh's strength plummeted in endgames.

4. Weakness in dull, un-dynamic positions, since he was unable to say 'No!' to his creative urges, even in positions where it was unwarranted. Rashid fixed numbers 1 through 3 on the list. He never could fix number 4! He began an intense exercise program of swimming and rowing to increase his physical stamina and avoid another episode of exhaustion-collapse at the end of tournaments. He gave precedence to study play with the black pieces, since this was his weakness. He began a deep study of Leonid Kubbel's endgame studies and attempted to solve them with pure mental visualization, without use of the board. I work on them also and I can truthfully testify they are nightmarishly difficult to solve! This may be why Nezhmetdinov's combinations exude a study-like quality. As for number 4 on the list, Nezh was psychologically incapable of overcoming his impulsive chess nature and all his life he continued to push too hard to complicate in dull positions, routinely over-pressing in games he should never have lost.

In 1940

Nezhmetdinov was drafted into military service, which didn't stop him from playing, although it certainly delayed his chess development. He made good use of his time by winning the Soviet Military Championship, scoring 13 out of 14, ahead of other strong Soviet masters. Even though Russian soldiers were dying by the millions in the war against the Nazi invasion, Rashid, either through good karma or maybe just blind luck, always seemed to be

deployed to places after a brutal battle had ended. By a miracle, he wasn't killed, wasn't wounded, and didn't suffer from PTSD, since he never fought in a single battle during his military service. Nezhmetdinov didn't



Nezhmetdinov (front left) playing first board for Tatarstan at the championship of the Volga region, 1952. Photo: Archive Sergey Voronkov.

so much as nick himself while shaving, while his comrades were being grievously wounded and killed by the legion (some estimate that around eight and a half million Russian soldiers were killed in WWII).

After his military service, Rashid continued to absorb, learn and deepen his understanding of chess by working with GM Ratmir Kholmov and also by further interacting with other Soviet grandmasters, who helped him to continually raise his level of play. 1950 was Nezhmetdinov's break-through year. In Gorky he won his first RSFSR Championship, ahead of players like Boleslavsky, Aronin, Dubinin, Kan, Ilivitzky and Novotelnov. In doing so he instantly became a chess (and checkers!) god of the Tatar region, the same way Tigran Petrosian became the chess god of Armenia later on.

Wishes always seemed to arrive excruciatingly late for Nezhmetdinov throughout his life. He learned chess at the relatively late age of 11, married at the late age of 40 and, most oddly, reached his prime in his forties to early fifties, an incredibly late age. The only other top player I can think of who did the same was Kortchnoi, who reached his peak rating at age 47. At this point Nezhmetdinov also wrote his first chess book in the Tatar language. His motivation was to improve his game even more, as he painstakingly analyzed his games and dug deeper into his opening ideas.

In the paranoid, Cold-War 1950's, it was incredibly difficult for Soviet players to earn an international chess title. At long last, in March of 1954, Rashid and various other untitled Soviet masters were granted permission to participate in an international tournament in Bucharest. Nezhmetdinov, Kortchnoi, Furman and Kholmov were first invited for training sessions under the tutelage of the giants David Bronstein and Isaac Boleslavsky. The four players all attained the title of International Master, with Nezhmetdinov winning the first brilliancy prize for his win against Paoli, which is annotated in this book.

In 1958, Nezhmetdinov won the Russian Federation Championship an unprecedented fifth time. In 1961, he qualified for and took second place in the 29th USSR Championship, the most elite tournament in the world at the time. Then, in 1960, when Tal was about to face Mikhail Botvinnik for the World Championship Match, the challenger from Riga asked his stylistic hero Nezhmetdinov to be his trainer, coach, second and sparring partner. This choice may have altered chess history, since Nezhmetdinov encouraged Tal to remain true to their shared style. As we all know, Tal went on to confuse and dethrone the great logician Botvinnik, to become the new World Champion.



Nezhmetdinov at a later age. Photo: Turov Archive.

As the years passed, Nezh's performances began to decline, with more mistakes committed in time pressure. Yet he never stopped winning best-game and brilliancy prizes. Rashid's final tournament was in 1972, at the age of 60 in Latvia, where he shared third and fourth places – still an outstanding result.

Nezhmetdinov literally died while playing chess. In the hospital, Rashid began a game with the readers of the newspaper *Socialist Tatarstan*. In June of 1974 his moves came to an abrupt halt due to his passing. In his honour, the game was finished by Nezhmetdinov's students.

Destination: g4.

51...♙f7 52.♖h3 ♘c6 53.♗f5+ ♖g8

54.♖g4 ♘cd4 55.♗d5

There is no reason to calculate if 55.♗xf4 wins or not.

55...♘c6 56.g6 ♖g7

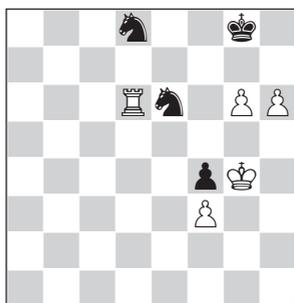
I don't wish to belabour the obvious, by pointing out that Black can do nothing useful and can only wait.

57.♗d7+ ♖g8

A) 57...♖h6 58.♗h7#;

B) 57...♖f6 58.♗f7+ ♖e5 59.h6 and Black must resign.

58.♗d6 ♘cd8 59.h6 1-0



The defence has run its course. If 59...♖f8 60.h7 ♖g7 61.♖f5 wins.

Game 9 Italian Game

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

V.Baskin

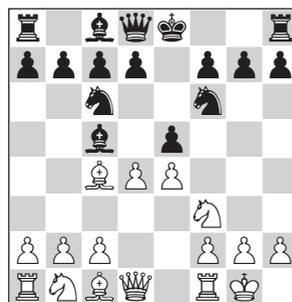
Kishinev 1948

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4

Later on in his career, Nezhmetdinov faithfully stuck with the Ruy Lopez.

3...♙c5 4.0-0 ♘f6 5.d4!?

Oh, the folly of youth. We note a violent expression upon the face of a normally expressionless opening.



The trouble is ostentation tends not to work in tactically repressed positions. Nezhmetdinov demands complications even if they objectively favour his opponent. I'm being a bit kind giving this move a 'interesting' mark, rather than the 'dubious' it really deserves.

5...♙xd4

Black takes up the challenge. This way he really does win a pawn. Transposing to the Max Lange Attack with 5...exd4 is less ambitious though 6.e5 d5 7.exf6 dxc4 8.♗e1+ ♙e6 9.♘g5 ♖d5 10.♘c3 ♗f5 11.♘ce4 0-0-0 is known to be okay for Black.

6.♘xd4 ♘xd4

6...exd4? 7.e5 d5 8.exf6 dxc4 9.fxg7 ♗g8 10.♗e1+ ♙e6 11.♗h5 (threat: 12.♗xe6+) 11...♗f6 12.♙g5 ♗f5 13.g4! ♗g6 14.♗xg6 hxg6 15.♙f6 and the continued existence of the g7-pawn gives White the better chances in the ending, Nilsen-Jonsson, Reykjavik 2015.

7.f4

White owns the bishop pair and has a development lead, which calls for a confrontational opening of the position.

7...d6 8.fxe5 dxe5 9.♙g5 c6

Black's best continuation is 9...♖e7!
 10.c3 ♘e6 11.♙xe6 (11.♙xf6 gxf6
 12.♘a3 ♘f4 also favours Black)
 11...♙xe6 12.♙xf6 gxf6 13.♘a3 ♖g8
 14.♙h1 ♗d7 15.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 16.♗xf6
 ♖g4 17.♗e1 ♘e7 18.♗f2 ♗d8 19.h3
 ♗f4! 20.♗xf4 exf4 21.♘b5 c5 22.b3
 ♗d2. White was completely busted in
 the ending in Alarcon Casellas-
 Bachmann, Barcelona 2014.

10.♗d3

Of course Nezh isn't interested in
 regaining sacrificed material at the
 cost of the initiative. After 10.c3
 ♘e6 11.♗xd8+ ♘xd8 12.♙xe6 ♙xe6
 13.♗xf6 gxf6 14.♙xf6+ ♘d7 15.♙xh8
 ♗xh8 Black looks slightly better,
 due to the superior minor piece and
 an already centralized king.



10...♙g4

This looks like a case of wrong
 move order. 10...b5! 11.♙b3 ♙g4
 (threat: 12...♙e2) 12.♗f2 ♘e2+!
 13.♙f1 (13.♙h1? is met with the back
 rank tactic 13...♘xe4! 14.♙xf7+ ♘f8
 15.♗a3+ c5 16.♗f1 ♘f2+! (weak back
 rank/overloaded defender) 17.♗xf2
 ♗d1+ 18.♗f1 ♗xf1#) 13...♘f4
 14.♙xf4 exf4 15.♘d2 0-0 and Black
 stands better.

11.♘c3

This simple developing move cuts
 off tricks on e2. White could also
 consider adventures with 11.♗g3
 ♙e6 12.♗xe5 0-0 13.♙xf6 (13.♗xf6?
 ♙xc4 favours Black: 14.♗d6 ♘e2+
 15.♙h1 ♗b6 16.♘d2 ♗fe8 17.♘xc4
 ♗xe5 18.♘xb6 axb6 19.♙d2 ♗xe4
 and White must fight for a draw)
 13...gxf6 14.♗g3+ ♙h8 15.♙d3 ♖g8
 and Black stands at least equal.

11...b5?!

Doesn't Baskin remember what
 happened to the Duke of Brunswick
 and Count Isouard when they played
 ...b7-b5 against Paul Morphy? Black
 has a good position after 11...♙e6.

12.♗g3!

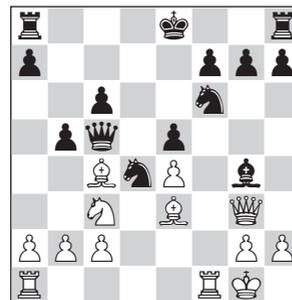
Zwischenzug. White threatens to
 take the e5-pawn, as well as 13.♙xf6
 followed by 14.♗xg4.

12...♗b6?

Threatening a nasty discovered
 double check on e2, yet the queen
 is needed in the centre. 12...♙e6!
 13.♙xe6 ♘xe6 14.♗ad1 ♗e7 15.♙h4!
 is only slightly in White's favour.

13.♙e3 ♗c5?!

Black had to try 13...♗b8 14.♙xf7+!
 ♘xf7 15.♗xg4 ♗d6 16.♙g5 when
 he is on the defensive and in some
 trouble.



Exercise (combination alert): Do you see White's shot?

Answer: Interference:

14. ♕d5!

Now 15. ♖xe5+ is a huge threat.

14...0-0

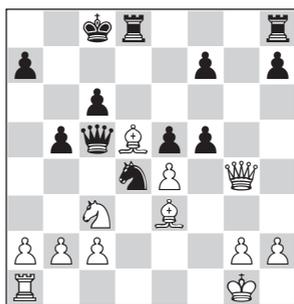
A) 14...0-0 15. ♖xf6 ♖xc3 16. bxc3 ♜e2+ 17. ♕f2 ♜xg3 18. ♖xc6 ♜h5 19. c4 and Black is in deep trouble;

B) 14...cxd5? 15. ♖xe5+ ♖e7 16. ♖xd4 b4 17. e5 bxc3 18. exf6 gxf6 19. ♖ae1 ♕e6 20. ♕g5! and Black's position falls apart.

15. ♖xf6! gxf6

15...cxd5?? 16. ♖xg4+ ♕b8 17. ♖xf7 leaves Black down a piece.

16. ♖xg4+ f5



Exercise (combination alert): Fear is a relative emotion. Throughout his career, Nezhmetdinov always kept his cool in the most fearful complications. How should White continue?

Answer: Sham queen sacrifice:

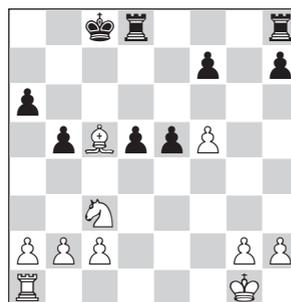
17. ♖xf5+! ♜xf5

After 17...♖d7 18. ♕b3 Black is busted since 18...♜e2+? fails to 19. ♕f2.

18. ♕xc5 cxd5 19. exf5 a6

White has emerged from the complications with two minor pieces for a rook. I was surprised to

see Stockfish 12's assessment of +5 for White.



20. ♕f2

Dare I accuse Nezh of passivity? Black's position crumbles after 20.a4!

20...♖hg8

20...♕b7! was necessary.

21.a4!

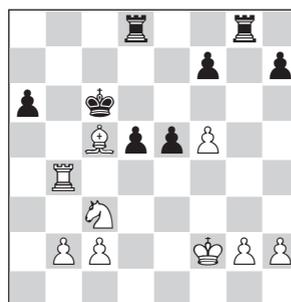
There we go!

21...bxa4

21...b4 22. ♕xb4 is also completely lost for Black.

22. ♖xa4 ♕b7 23. ♖b4+! ♕c6

If 23...♕c8, 24. ♖b6 wins.



Exercise (combination alert): It isn't so amazing if at sunrise, you

foresee the sunset later in the day.

We just feel in our bones that White has a combination here.

Answer: Piece sacrifice/mating net.

Black's king is in serious danger,

despite the reduced material on the board:

24. ♖b6+! ♕xc5

Now Black's king goes for a power walk and is mated in three moves. After 24...♕c7 25.♖xa6 Black's remaining pawns will be vending machines for White's rook. This is also totally hopeless for Black.

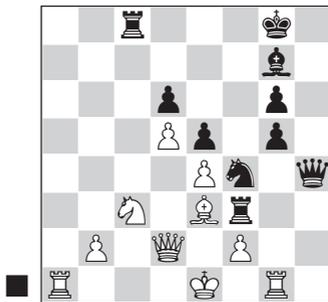
25. ♘a4+ ♕c4 26.b3+ ♕d4 27.♖b4#

Game 10

Leonid Shamaev

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Leningrad 1948



Exercise: (planning): How does Black reach a winning position?

Answer: Overloaded defender:

31... ♘g2+!

The purpose of this is to make White's king move and disrupt the intent to castle. The truncated version without the knight check doesn't work, since 31...♖h2?! allows 32.0-0-0!, downgrading complete disaster to the level of partial disaster. White, though still in trouble, is a lot better off here than in the game's continuation.

32. ♖e2

32.♖xg2 loses to 32...♖h1+ 33.♖e2 ♖xg2.

32... ♘f4+!

Back again!

33. ♕d1

A) 33.♕xf4?? leaves f2 hanging;

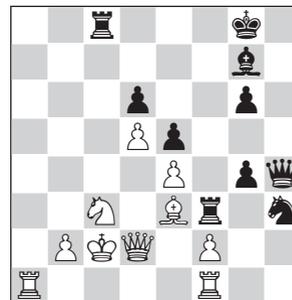
B) After 33.♖e1 we reach the same position with which we started, with one huge difference: White's king has moved, so 0-0-0 is removed from the defensive equation. 33...♖h2! (if Black had started with this move, then White would have 0-0-0! here) 34.♖f1 ♘g2+ 35.♖e2 g4 (threat: 36...♘xe3) 36.♖d3 ♕h6! 37.♖h1 ♕xe3 38.♖xh2 ♕xd2+ 39.♖xd2 ♖xf2+ 40.♖c1 g3 41.♖h1 ♘f4 and the advanced g-pawn wins Black the game.

33... ♘h3! 34.♖f1

White's defenders are anything but an imposing group: 34.♖g2 ♖cf8 35.♖c2 ♘xf2 36.♕xg5 (36.♖ag1 is met with 36...g4 with a winning position for Black) 36...♖xc3+! 37.bxc3 ♖xe4+ with a double attack on the white king and the g2-rook.

34...g4! 35. ♖c2

35.♖e2 ♖cf8 36.♖c2 ♘xf2 is also lost.



35...g3!

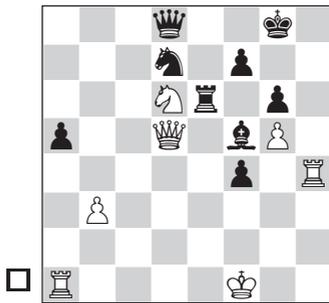
slower after 27...♙xf5 28.♖xf5 ♕a7+ 29.♔g2 ♖f2+ (spite check! A good soldier follows even stupid orders of superiors, while keeping opinions to herself) 30.♔xf2 ♜ad8 31.♞h5#. **27... ♖a7+ 28.♔f1 1-0**
28...♖f2+ 29.♔xf2 ♙xf5 30.♘xf5#.

Game 15

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Lev Aronin

Gorky 1950



You are on trial for your life for a murder you committed in front of a police station and 30 witnesses, most of whom recorded you with their cell phone video cameras. Your victim fought back and your blood was found on her and on the knife you used to stab her. I just described Aronin's position's chance of being found Not Guilty by the jury.

Exercise (combination alert):

We have tempting options, all highly favourable for White, like 30.♘xf7, or 30.♖d4. Yet there is an even stronger move. Find White's optimal continuation.

Answer: 30.♞h8+! 1-0

Step 1 is to attract Black's king to h8. Do you remember when Petrosian pulled this same idea against Spassky in their first World Championship match (coincidentally, 30.♖h8+! was the same move number as in this game)? 30...♔xh8 31.♘xf7+. Step 2: Knight fork. Black loses his queen.

Game 16 Caro-Kann Defence

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Mikhail Kamyshev

Gorky 1950

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6!?

This line is considered suspect today. 3...♙g4 is Black's most solid choice.

4.e5 ♘e4

After 4...♘fd7 surely Nezhmetdinov would have gone for the clogging sacrifice 5.e6 fxe6 6.d4 although perhaps stronger is to just play 5.d4 with a superior French Defence-like position for White.



5.♘e2!

This move was known all the way back to 1930, when Ragozin played it against Levenfish. The idea is to gain time on Black's knight with

d2-d3. After 5.d4 ♖xc3 6.bxc3 e6 7.c4 c5! 8.c3 ♘c6 Black got a decent French style position in Petr-Navara, Havlickuv Brod 2015.

5... ♖b6!

This is Black's best move, threatening mate on the move and preventing d2-d3. 5... ♗g4? wastes time: 6. ♖fg1! (threat: 7.f3, winning a piece) 6... ♗c5 7.d4 ♗cd7? (now Black is strategically lost; 7... ♗e6 was forced) 8.f3 ♗f5 9.g4! ♗g6 10. ♖f4 e6 11.h4 h6 12. ♖xg6 fxc6 13. ♗d3 ♖f7 with a strategically wretched position for Black, Andriasyan-Minasian, Yerevan 2020.

6.d4 c5?!

This move is in violation of the **Principles**: Don't open the game and create confrontation when lagging in development. The better move order was 6...e6 7. ♖g3 and now it's okay to play 7...c5.

7.dxc5! ♖xc5 8. ♗ed4 ♗c6



9. ♗b5

Nezh's instinct was always to develop rapidly. Yet this move comes at the cost of potentially handing over his powerful light-squared bishop. To be strongly considered was the strategic path

9.c3 to preserve the light-squared bishop: 9...e6 (or 9... ♗g4 10. ♗b5 a6 11. ♗xc6+ bxc6 12. ♗e3 with a difficult position for Black) 10. ♗e3 ♗xd4 11. ♗xd4 ♖c7 12. ♗d3 and Black's position looks like a misplayed French, clearly in White's favour due to his absolute control over the d4-hole.

9... ♗d7?

This move is slow. I have a feeling Black should have taken his chances with 9...a6 10. ♗xc6+ bxc6 11.0-0 e6 12. ♗e3 ♖b4 13. ♗xc6 ♖xb2 with an uncomfortable yet still playable position.

10.0-0 ♗xe5

Not all combinations should be played, but to be fair, I don't see any wonderful defensive options for Black at this point. Also awful was 10...e6 11. ♗e3 ♗xd4 12. ♗xd7+ ♖xd7 13. ♗xd4 ♖c4 14.b3 ♖c3 15. ♖f3 ♖e8 16. ♗b5 ♖c6 17.c4! and it's difficult to envision Black saving the game due to his massive development deficit.

11. ♗xe5 ♗xb5 12. ♗xb5?!

Inaccurate. After 12. ♖e1! Black won't survive, for example: 12... ♗f6 13.b4! ♖b6 14.c4! dxc4 15.a4 ♗d7 16. ♗xc4 ♖xb4 17. ♗b5! (threatening to bang down either knight on d6) 17... ♗xb5 18. ♗d6+! (zwischenzug) 18... ♖xd6 (if 18... ♗d7?? 19. ♗xb5+ Black is either mated or must hand over his queen) 19. ♖xd6 ♗c6, Black doesn't have enough for the queen.

12... ♖xb5 13. ♖e1 ♗f6 14. ♗g5 e6? 14... ♖d8 was necessary.



Exercise (planning): Most of us consider the **Principle:** Develop rapidly in the opening to be a self-evident truth. So why do even very strong players from time to time find themselves in violation?

What is the best way to exploit White's development lead here?

Answer: 15.c4!

Pry the centre open by pushing the c-pawn two squares, following the **Principles:** Open the game and create confrontation when leading in development.

15... ♖a5

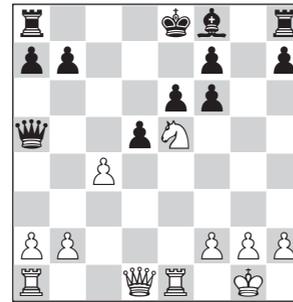
15...dxc4?? loses instantly to 16. ♕xf6 gxf6 17.a4! – removal of the guard. Black's queen can no longer cover d7 and the only move remaining is to give her away for White's knight and rook with 17... ♖xe5 (or 17... ♖d5 18. ♖xd5 exd5 19. ♗g6+ ♕d7 20. ♗xh8 ♕b4 21. ♖ed1 and White wins) 18. ♖xe5 fxe5 which is lost for Black.

16. ♕xf6

Worth consideration was 16.cxd5 ♖xd5 17. ♖a4+ b5 18. ♖a6 ♕e7 19. ♖ad1 ♖c5 20. ♕e3! ♖c7 (White's knight can't be touched due to a queen check on c6) 21. ♖c1 ♖d6

(21... ♖xe5?? once again loses to 22. ♖c6+) 22. ♖xb5+ ♕f8 and it's difficult to believe Black will survive this large a development lag.

16...gxf6



Exercise (critical decision):

Details begin to come into focus. It is taken as an article of faith that Nezhmetdinov will sacrifice a piece. But on which square? White must pick between 17. ♗xf7 and 17.cxd5. Only one of the lines wins by force.

17. ♗xf7?!

This move is like one of those social media posts in all caps, where lower case letters are better, since then people who read it don't think you are crazy. Nezhmetdinov's games rarely go in a smooth flow.

The news I bring is not happy: Nezh picked the wrong line. White still has a strong attack after this sacrifice, yet winning was:

Answer: 17.cxd5! fxe5 18.dxe6

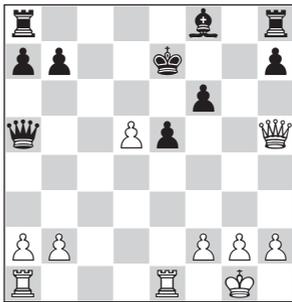
A) 18...fxe6 19. ♖h5+ ♕e7 20. ♖xe5 (Black's king doesn't have a prayer) 20... ♖b6 21. ♖b5 ♖c7 22. ♖c5 ♖b6 23. ♖ac1 ♖d8 24. ♖c7+ ♖d7 25. ♖g5+ ♕e8 26. ♖xd7 ♕xd7 27. ♖f6! and Black's rook is trapped since

moving it to g8 allows a double attack check on f7;

B) 18...♔e7 19.♖d7+ ♘f8 20.♗xb7 ♗d8 21.♗f3 f6 22.♗h5 ♔g7 (22...♗e8 is met with a queen check on h6, followed by a rook lift to e3) 23.♗f7+ ♔h6 24.♞e3 with a winning attack;

C) 18...♗c7 19.♞c1 ♗d8 (19...♗e7? loses to 20.♗a4+ ♔d8 21.♞ed1+) 20.♗h5 ♗e7 21.♞xe5 ♔d8 22.exf7 and Black is mated.

17...♔xf7 18. ♗h5+ ♔e7 19.cxd5 e5



20.f4!

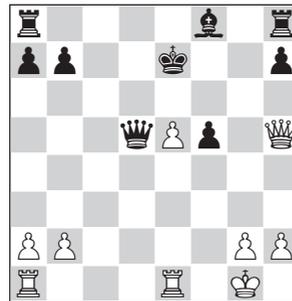
Nezhmetdinov's attacking intuition doesn't let him down. This move is White's best shot at a win.

20.d6+ was an inferior alternative: 20...♔e6 21.♗h3+ f5 22.f4 ♗b6+ 23.♔h1 ♔xd6 (23...e4?? is met with 24.♞xe4+) 24.fxe5 ♔xe5 25.♗c3 ♗b5 26.♞xe5+! ♗xe5 27.♞e1 ♗e4 and Black still has chances to survive.

20...♗xd5?

This loses. After 20...♗b6+! 21.♔h1 ♔g7 22.♞ac1 ♗d6 23.♗g4 ♔f8! 24.fxe5 fxe5 25.♗g5+ ♔d7 26.♞xe5 ♗h6 27.♗g4+ ♔d8 Black's position is sickly, yet remains among the living.

21.fxe5 f5



22.e6!

The upstart e-pawn has a say in how the attack will be conducted. White threatens to infiltrate f7. Yes, Black is up a piece, but if you have a society of 1,000 rabbits and 10 wolves, do you really believe the minority will bend its will to the wishes of the majority?

22...♔f6

22...♗d4+ 23.♔h1 ♗f6 24.♞ac1 ♞b8 25.♞c7+ ♔d6 26.♞f7 ♗xb2 27.♗d1+ ♔c5 28.e7 with a winning attack.

23.h4!

Threat: 24.♗g5 mate, as well as 24.♗f7 mate.

23...♔c5+ 24.♔h1 ♗xe6

Complete desperation.

A) 24...♞af8 25.♗g5#;

B) 24...♔e7 25.♗f7+ ♔d8 and simplest is 26.e7+, winning Black's queen and soon mating.

25. ♗h6+ 1-0

Game 17 Grünfeld Indian Defence
Rashid Nezhmetdinov
Lusikal

Kazan simultaneous exhibition 1951

1.d4!?

C) 37...♖e8 loses the queen to 38.♗e6+ ♘d7 39.♗xd6+ ♘c7 40.♗xd8 ♘xg6 41.♗xa8 ♗xa8 42.♙xg6.

37.♗xf6 ♘c7 38.♗xf7+

Black's material continues to diminish.

38...♘b8

Medicine doesn't work on a corpse.

The move 38...♘b6 is met with 39.b4! with a crushing attack.

39.♖f6!

Black is unable to evade a queen swap, after which White gets an easily won ending.

39...♖xf6 40.♗xf6 1-0

Black wasn't suitably awed and hopelessly played on. Nezhmetdinov won easily.

Game 88 Sicilian Defence

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Mikhail Tal

Baku ch-URS 1961

Tal had just lost his rematch against Botvinnik when this game was played. Tal later said the day he lost this game, the 'Evergreen Rashid', was the happiest one of his life, since he was staggered by Nezhmetdinov's creativity.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♙e2 a6 7.0-0 ♖c7 8.f4 ♘bd7

Najdorf Sicilian patria nostra – Najdorf Sicilian is my homeland!

Tal plays it in Najdorf fashion, where he had more experience than in the Scheveningen Variation.

8...♘c6 is the Scheveningen.



9.g4!?

Moment of Contemplation: Lead us not into temptation... oh who am I kidding? The question arises: which is the norm and which is the aberration? It's one thing to play the g2-g4 bayonet lunge when Black's king is already committed to the kingside, and quite another when Black's king remains uncommitted in the centre. On top of it, Nezhmetdinov has the gall to play it against a former world champion!

9...b5 10.a3

10.g5 is met with 10...b4!.

10...♙b7 11.♙f3



11...♘c5?!

This logical move may actually be the seed of Tal's coming problems. The knight may belong on b6.

A) 11...h6 was worth consideration, for two reasons:

1. It discourages White's g4-g5, since this would open the h-file against White's king after ...h6xg5.
2. Black can at some point play for ...g7-g5, if conditions allow for it.

B) 11...h6 is also okay for Black, e.g. 12.g5 h7fd7 13.g2 e7 14.g4 g6 and it's anybody's game.

12. e2



12...e5!

Tal counters in the centre. 12...e5 looks innocent enough, yet the engine starts liking White more and more as moves proceed. For example: 13.g5 h7fd7 14.b4! a4 15.hxa4 bxa4 16.c4! and if 16...c8 17.eb2 xc4 18.d2 c7 19.ac1 b6 20.xc8+ xc8 21.c1 b7 22.f1 0-0 23.c3! (threatening with horrible discovered attacks on g7) 23...e5 (23...c8? 24.hc6 f8 25.xg7+ e8 26.ha5 is also heavily in White's favour) 24.hf5 ed8 25.d2 ec7 26.f2! and the engines still prefer White in the coming ending.

13. hf5

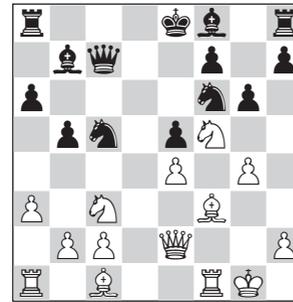
13.hd5!? hxd5 14.exd5 0-0-0 15.hc6 e4! 16.e4 xe4 hxe4 (16...e8?? fails

miserably to the discovered check 17.e5+ when Black finds himself down a rook after 17...e6 18.dxe6 xc6 19.e7+ e6 20.e4! d5 21.exf8+ xf8 22.g2) 17.xe4 xc6 18.dxc6 d5 19.f5+ b8 20.e3 f6 21.f2 xc6 22.ae1 and White stands a bit better.

13...g6 14.fxe5

After 14.hg3 he6 15.g5 hd7 16.hd5 ed5 17.exd5 h4 18.g2 xc2 19.f2 b3 20.g4 hc5 21.e4 the engine slightly prefers White in this complete mess of a position.

14...dxe5



15. h6!

This move applies pressure to f7, while preventing Black from castling short. After 15.he3 he6 16.hcd5 hxd5 17.hxd5 ed5 18.exd5 hd4 19.e4 c8 20.ed1 f5! 21.e1 c5 22.e3 the engine calls it dead even, which is code for unclear.

15...he6 16.g2 eg7?

Tal should have fought harder for control over the dark squares with 16...hf4! 17.xf4 exf4 18.e5 hd5! 19.hxd5 ed5 20.ed5 c5+ (this double attack regains the lost piece) 21.f2 xd5 22.ad1 c6 23.hxf7!

of the incantation. With complexity comes error. The assessment dips from better for White to better for Black after a single inaccurate move. 21. ♖xf4! ♙xd5 22. exd5 ♖b6+ 23. ♔h1 0-0-0 24. ♗xf7 ♙xb2 25. ♖f1 ♖he8! (25... ♖hf8?? loses to 26. d6!) 26. ♗xd8 ♙e5 27. ♖f7 ♗xd8 28. d6 ♙xd6 29. ♖xh7 is called at dead even.

21... ♙xe5?

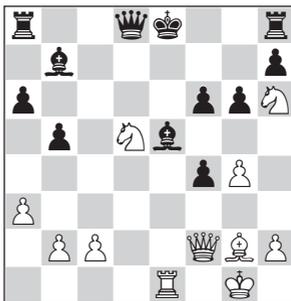
It's unwise to allow White to open the e-file.

A) After 21... ♙h4! 22. ♖d4 (White must guard the d5-knight) 22... ♖f8 the complications are slightly in Black's favour;

B) 21... ♙xd5? walks into the trap: 22. exf6 ♙xg2 23. ♖e1+ ♗d7 (23... ♗f8?? 24. ♖c5+ and mate next move) 24. ♖d1+ ♗e6 25. ♖xd8 ♖hxd8 26. ♗xg2 and Black is busted.

22. ♖e1 f6?

Tal had to try 22... ♙xd5! 23. ♖xe5+ ♙e6 24. ♙c6+ ♗f8 25. ♙xa8 ♖d6! 26. ♖xf4 ♗g7 27. ♙g2 f6 28. ♖e4 ♖xf4 29. ♖xf4 ♗xh6 30. ♖xf6 ♙c8. Black is fighting for a draw pawn down with an inferior position.



Exercise (combination alert):
Tal's piercing Rasputin eyes rarely

missed a combination, yet there were exceptions. On his last move he blundered. Prove why.

Answer: 23. ♗xf6+!!

Annihilation of defensive barrier.

23... ♖xf6 24. ♖d4!

Pinned piece. Note that Black's king is unable to escape via castling, on either side.

24... ♗f8

24... ♙xg2 25. ♖xe5+ ♗f8 26. g5! (overloaded defender) 26... ♖c6 27. ♖xf4+ ♗g7 28. ♖e7#.

25. ♖xe5

Threat: 26. ♖f5!.

25... ♖d8



26. ♖f5+!

Discovered attack.

Also winning was 26. ♖xf4+ ♗g7 27. ♖f7+ ♗xh6 28. g5+!. Black must give away his queen, since he is mated after 28... ♗h5 29. ♙f3+ ♙xf3 30. ♖xf3+ ♗h4 31. ♖g3+ ♗h5 32. ♖h3#. A blade is inserted into the black king's doughy belly and then twisted.

26... ♗xf5 27. ♖xh8+ ♗e7 28. ♖g7+ ♗e6

If 28... ♗d6, 29. ♗f7+ forks king and queen. This line and the game's continuation are no more than

different display panels in front of the same brand of computer.

29.gxf5+ 1-0



After 29...♔d6, 30.♗f7+ wins the queen and forces mate in 7.

Game 89 Ruy Lopez

Dragoljub Ciric

Rashid Nezhmetdinov

Rostov-on-Don 1961 (8)

1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♘c6 3.♘b5 a6 4.♙a4 d6 5.0-0 ♙g4

5...♙d7 is Black's main move.

6.h3 ♙h5

6...h5!?! leads to wild adventures, favourable for White. Here is an example: 7.d4! (**Principle: Meet a wing attack with a central counter**) 7...b5 8.♙b3 ♗xd4 9.hxg4 hxg4 10.♗g5! (blocking Black's threat of 10...♙g4) 10...♗h6 11.♙d5 c6 12.c3 cxd5 13.cxd4 ♙e7 14.♙d2 dxe4 15.dxe5 d5 16.♗c3 e3 (Black regains the piece at the cost of a bad position) 17.♙xd5 ♙xg5 18.♙c6+ ♙f8 19.♙xe3 ♙xe3 20.fxe3 ♙e8 21.♙d6+ ♙g8 22.♙ad1 with advantage for White, De Firmian-Timman, Reykjavik 2000.

7.c3 ♗f6 8.♙e2

8.♙e1 is White's main move.



8...g5!?

Moment of Contemplation:

Theoretical novelty! Nezhmetdinov quickly establishes his chess identity. The danger of a belief of living an enchanted existence is that we subconsciously feel that nothing can ever harm us. Ah yes, another typical day in the Nezh Lopez! Of course, the engine screams bloody murder at his crazy move, but he doesn't care if it's objectively unsound, as long as the complications level rises precipitously.

'Normal' players opt for 8...♙e7.

9.g4?!

When we encounter that which is beyond our everyday occurrences, it's natural to be distrustful. This nervous reaction was exactly what Nezhmetdinov hoped for. 9.d4! follows the **Principle: Counter in the centre when assaulted on the wing**. The complications favour White after 9...b5 10.♙d1! (reinforcing f3) 10...exd4 11.♙xg5 ♙g8 12.♙f4 ♗e5 13.♗bd2 ♗g6 14.♙g3 dxc3 15.bxc3 ♙h6 16.a4 ♗f4 17.♙xf4 ♙xf4 18.axb5 and it's still complicated although objectively Black stands worse.