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The Correct Exchange in the Endgame

by

Eduardas Rozentalis

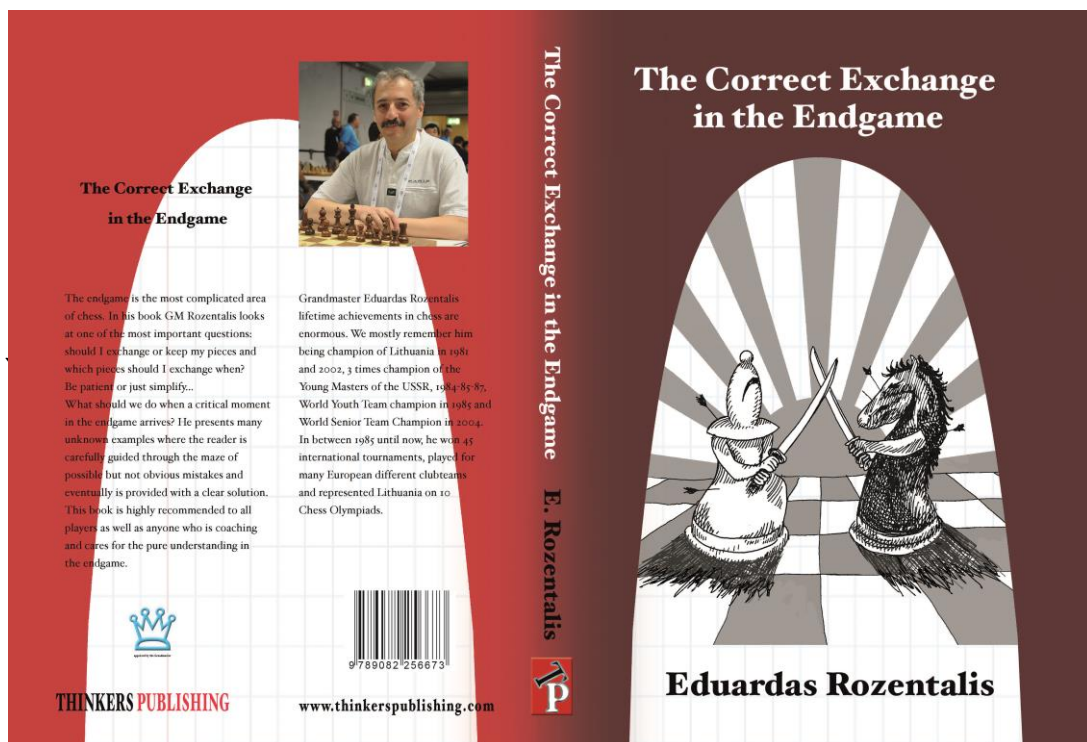
The endgame is the most complicated area of chess. In his book GM Rozentalis looks at some of the most important questions: the connection between the opening and the endgame, when to exchange, bishops against knights, be patient or just simplify. Along the way he gives a word of advice when to calculate as exactly as possible and when to rely on your acquired knowledge. He presents many examples from his own experiences where the reader is well guided and eventually is provided with a clear solution. This book is highly recommended to all players as well as anyone who is coaching and cares for the pure understanding in the endgame.



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Introduction

In the Informant 120 I published an article “Going for a pawn ending – calculate the right exchange”.

Having received many positive feedbacks, I considered writing a book on this subject: how to decide about the transition to a pawn ending. However recently an excellent book “Liquidation on the Chess Board” has been written by Joel Benjamin and this persuaded me to reconsider the general concept and change the subject to the exchange of pieces in the endgame.

Let’s first have a look at the next game. We will start even from the opening giving us some interesting guidance:

👤 Rozentalis, Eduardas
👤 Wedberg, Tom
🌐 New York 1997

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 a6 4. ♙xc6

This is the Exchange variation of the Ruy Lopez. White exchanges his Bishop to change the black pawn structure. It is by far not the main variation of the Ruy Lopez but a quite popular opening amongst many players who cannot or do not want to endeavour very complex and long variations. It does not promise White any essential advantage, but just gives a solid and clear play.

I used it practically my whole chess career and it delivered me many wins.

4... dxc6 5. 0-0 ♙d6

This is also a side variation. However, we will not discuss the opening here, as our subject is exchanges and the endgame.

6. d4 exd4 7. ♚xd4



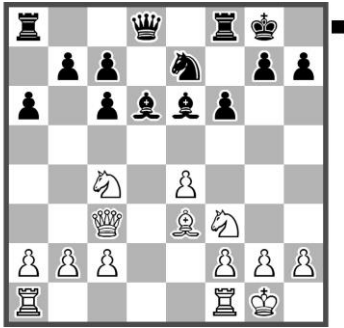
Position after: 7. ♚xd4

White achieved one of his main goals: he exchanged a couple of central pawns which gives him a clean pawn majority on the king-side, while Black's majority on the queen-side is less striking as he has doubled pawns.

7... f6 8. ♙e3 ♘e7 9. ♘bd2 ♙e6 10. ♚c3

White wishes to put his Knight on c4, but the immediate 10. ♘c4? would lose a pawn: 10... ♙xh2+ 11. ♚xh2 ♚xd4 12. ♘xd4 ♙xc4.

10... 0-0 11. ♘c4



Position after: 11. ♖c4



Position after: 18... ♕f8?

White starts his simple plan – to exchange as many pieces as possible meanwhile exploiting his pawn structure advantage.

11... ♗xc4?

My opponent Grandmaster Wedberg allowed me to implement this plan totally. He should have kept the Bishop and play 11... ♖g6.

12. ♕xc4+ ♔h8 13. ♖ad1 ♕e8 14. ♗c5 ♗xc5?

Once again, Black should not have exchanged the Bishop. 14... ♖d8 was the correct move, inviting White to exchange on d6 while this would have improved black pawn structure.

15. ♕xc5 ♖g6 16. ♖fe1 ♕f7 17. b3 ♖fe8 18. ♖d4 ♕f8?

Voluntarily going for an endgame. White is more active and better, but the middle game with Queens on the board would have given more chances for Black to equalize.

19. ♕xf8+ ♖xf8 20. f3

White achieved a lot. He has an extra pawn in the centre enabling him one day to make good use of this. As for Black's extra pawn on the queenside: it is doubled and much more difficult to use it in an efficient way.

20... ♖ad8 21. ♔f2

It is an endgame, so both sides can and should bring their Kings closer to the centre.

21... ♔g8 22. ♖f5 ♕f7 23. ♖e3 b5

Of course Black should try to organize some play on the queenside, but this move also weakens his pawns.

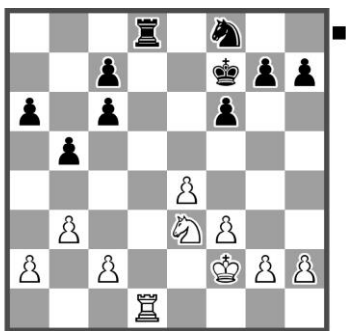
He should probably have considered 23... a5 24. a4 b6 followed by ... ♖e6, relocating the Knight to d4 or c5.

24. ♖xd8

(see diagram next column)

The moment has come to exchange all Rooks.

24... ♖xd8 25. ♖d1



Position after: 25. ♖d1

25... ♗xd1?

Black exchanges the last Rooks and finds himself in a probably lost position. He absolutely should have kept one Rook.

Better was 25... ♗a8! after which Black preserves his chances to get some counter play on the queenside.

26. ♘xd1

After swapping so many pieces we now reached a knight ending. White has a clear advantage in the form of an extra pawn in the centre, which allows him to organize a passed pawn. In his turn Black has very little chances to create a passed pawn, as his pawns are doubled. The knight endgame is strategically won for White. All he needs is an accurate and some precise technique to bring home the full point.

26... c5 27. ♔e3 ♔e6 28. f4

The white pawns are ready to move forward seizing more space.

28... ♞d7 29. ♞b2

It is equally important to improve the Knight's location.

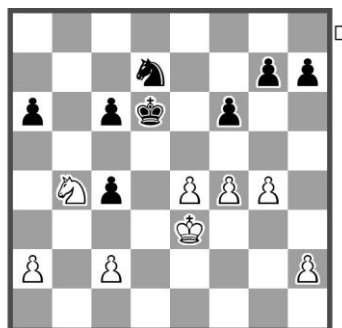
29... ♔d6 30. g3

White is in no hurry.

30... ♔e6 31. ♞d3 ♔d6 32. g4

Time to move the pawn.

32... c4 33. bxc4 bxc4 34. ♞b4 c6



Position after: 34... c6

35. a3!

Such endgames usually do not require long calculations, just 2-3 precise moves ahead should do the job. White prepares the way for his Knight heading towards a2-c3.

Of course, not 35. ♞xa6? c5 and the Knight is trapped.

35... a5 36. ♞a2 ♞b6 37. ♞c3

We can see that the Knight is relocated excellently. It blocks the black pawn and restricts the black Knight.

37... c5 38. h4

Now the queenside is blocked White can move his kingside pawns.

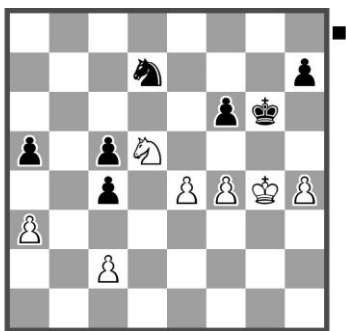
38... ♔e6 39. ♘b5 ♔d7 40. g5 ♔e6 41. gxf6

White exchanges the pawns, thus making the black 'f' and 'h' pawns his future targets.

41... gxf6 42. ♘c3

Black is in zugzwang and the white pieces are starting to penetrate his side of the board.

42... ♘d7 43. ♘d5 ♔f7 44. ♔f3 ♔g6 45. ♔g4



Position after: 45. ♔g4

The white King goes forward compelling Black to move his h-pawn which will become a real weakness.

45... h5+ 46. ♔f3 ♔f7 47. ♔e3 ♔e6 48. f5+

With this move White prefers to win the black h-pawn instead of making a passed pawn in the centre.

48... ♔f7 49. ♘f4 ♘e5 50. c3

Once again White should not be in a hurry preventing any counter play. Black wanted to play ...c4-...c3, followed by ...♘c4. Now this door is closed for good!

50... ♔e7 51. ♘xh5 ♘d3 52. ♘f4 ♘e1 53. a4

The last accuracy. Black can't attack this pawn anymore and is down-and-out.

1-0

This was a clear example of a strategic advantage which nicely demonstrated that White had good reasons to accept the exchange of every piece because after every simplification his winning chances were growing. Adversely Black should have avoided this at any cost or at least thought twice before exchanging a piece and to determine which ones to keep. Therefore, we can now understand that while White had no difficulty solving this problem Black had a far more difficult task.

However, in many cases, the task is not as easy to solve as in this example and both sides have to be very careful when deciding to go for a simplification or keep the pieces on the board. Every piece exchange shifts the position dramatically, meaning this is a very important long term decision. Quite

often we reach an endgame while being in time-trouble. This impedes our decision as we don't have enough time to calculate long variations and need to trust our intuition.

In this book we will examine different types of endings and offer guidance to decide upon the correct decision. We will focus mainly on the exchange of pieces, not

pawns. The exchange of pawns will be the subject of a separate book.

Every chess player can find many examples in his own practice. Often he needs extensive analysis to conclude if his decision in the game was correct or wrong. But such work always pays off in the long run.

This way we significantly improved our endgame understanding. Studying endga-

mes of top players is also very useful. However, the games of the best world players can easily be found on every chess website and in chess magazines. Therefore, I decided to present you some less known endgames. Mainly examples from my own practice.

To avoid boring and dry comments I also used several instructive positions from the excellent daily e-newspaper 'Chess Today' from my good friend the Irish Grandmaster Alex Baburin. Alex, I owe you a drink or two☺!

And now my dear reader, let's start talking about the correct exchange in the endgame.

Chapter 1 – Evaluation of the Exchange

First of all, if we consider the possible exchange of a piece we have to evaluate the consequences.

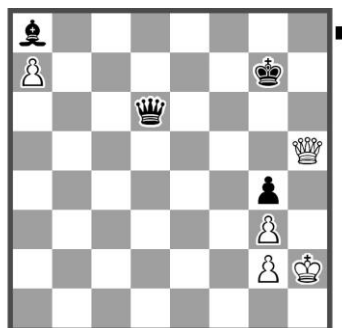
What will we get as a result? Will our position really improve? Maybe by transposition we will reach a well-known theoretical position or our pawn structure might be improved.

Let us have a closer look at the most common reasons for an exchange. And equally important the opposite: why we sometimes should refrain from an exchange.

Simplification in a better position

Quite often it is useful to exchange some pieces when we have extra material or a positional advantage. Because our opponent will have less counter play.

👤 Rozentalis, Eduardas
👤 Weindl, Alfred
🌐 Biel 1990



It is Black to move.

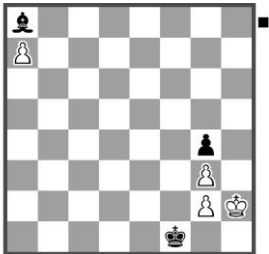
73... ♔h6

Black is a piece up and heads for some simplification by exchanging the Queens. But first of all he needs to evaluate the position arising after this exchange.

74. ♔h4

White in his turn should notice that the exchange of the Queens leads to a lost position. Thus he has to avoid the simplification.

Let's check what happens after the exchange of Queens: 74. ♔xh6+? ♔xh6 75. ♔g1 ♔g5 76. ♔f2 ♔f5 77. ♔f1 The white King can't leave his g2-pawn unprotected as the black Bishop will capture the pawn. 77... ♔e4 78. ♔f2 ♔d3 The black King goes forward, and sooner or later the white King will find himself in a zugzwang position. 79. ♔f1 ♔e3 80. ♔g1 ♔e2 81. ♔h1 ♔f1 82. ♔h2 (see analysis diagram)



Position after: 82. ♔h2

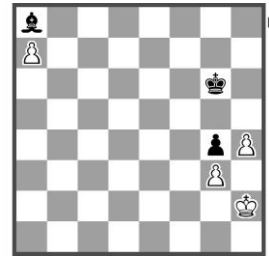
82... ♔f2 White has to give up both pawns.

(Of course, not 82... ♔xg2?? because of the stalemate after 83. a8=♔ ♔xa8.)

74... ♔g6

The white Queen is pinned, so Black can safely move his King.

It would be a big mistake to exchange the Queens not without a proper evaluation of the position after 74... ♔xh4+?? 75. gxf4 ♔g6 76. g3 (see analysis diagram)



Position after: 76. g3

Only White can have some winning chances, as both black's pieces are occupied at guarding the two dangerous passed pawns while the white King can assist those pawns.

75. ♔g1

Once more, White's only chance. Exchanging on h6 is losing as we already discussed while 75. ♔h1 allows the winning exchange 75... ♔xh4+ 76. gxf4 ♔h5, and White loses a pawn, as the g2-pawn is pinned and can't protect the pawn on h4.

75... ♔xh4?

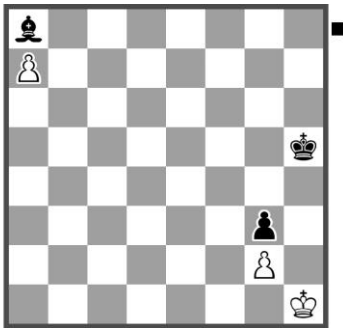
A bad evaluation or a lack of knowledge!

If Black didn't play so quickly and wrongly, he would have easily discovered the road to victory: 75... ♔e3+ Avoiding the exchange. 76. ♔f1 ♔e4 77. ♔h2 and White has to protect the pawn. But now his Queen is placed on a very passive square. After 77... ♔d5! The black Bishop comes closer to the white King and a mating attack is inevitable.

76. gxh4 g3

Most likely Black stopped his evaluation right here when he decided the exchange. He thought that after capturing the h4-pawn he would have an easy win. But he wasn't aware that the position with an extra Bishop and a pawn on g2 versus a pawn on g3 is a theoretical draw.

77. h5+ ♔xh5 78. ♔h1



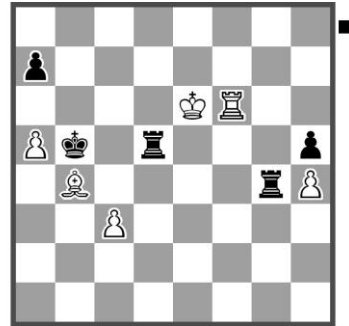
Position after: 78. ♔h1

Black can't win this position. White will be happy to give up his a7-pawn. The white King has a safe haven on the squares h1 and g1. And if the black King arrives at f2 or f1 it is stalemate.

78... ♔g5 79. ♔g1 ♔f4 80. ♔h1 ½-½

Another example:

♁ Schmittdiel, Eckhard
♁ Rozentalis, Eduardas
♁ Dortmund 1993



Black to move. White has a pawn for the exchange and some drawing chances.

50... ♔c4

Black activates his pieces and also wants to exchange Rooks.

50... ♔c6 would give White counter chances: 51. ♔e7+ ♔c7 52. ♔e6

51. ♖f7

As his h4-pawn is hanging White has to attack a black pawn!

51... ♖e4+ 52. ♔f6 ♖f4+

Black wants to exchange Rooks.

52... ♖xh4 53. ♖xa7 ♖f4+ would also give Black the better position but White would

keep some chances in a sharp fight after 54. ♔g6 h4 55. ♖h7.

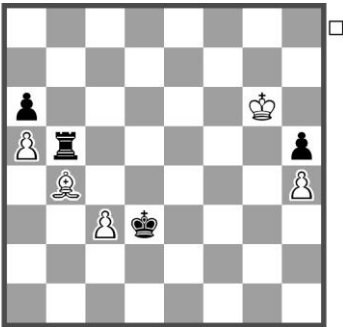
53. ♔g6 ♖xf7 54. ♔xf7 a6

A useful move. The black pawn should be on a light square because White owns the dark Bishop.

55. ♔f6 ♔d3

The black King is coming to the centre.

56. ♔g6 ♖b5



Position after: 56... ♖b5

When he went for the Rook exchange, Black evaluated this position as being close to winning. Of course not an easy win but also no risk of losing, evidently as important in a practical game. In addition, his advantage is static. This means that he can try different plans while his advantage will not evaporate!

57. ♔f6 ♔e4 58. ♔e6

The Bishop is stuck, so only the white King can move.

58... ♖d5 59. ♔f6

59. c4 ♖d4+

59... ♖f5+

The black pieces are well coordinated. They are masters of the light squares.

60. ♔e6

In case of 60. ♔g6 the Black King marches to the h4-pawn: 60... ♔f4 61. c4 ♔g4 62. c5 ♖f4.

60... ♖f4 61. ♕e7 ♔d3

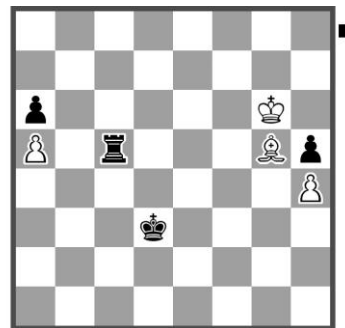
The black pieces start attacking the white pawns.

62. ♕g5 ♖a4 63. ♕d8 ♖c4 64. ♔f5

White is not able to protect all of his pawns, he now must attack a black one.

64. ♕f6 was losing as well: 64... ♖c5 →

64... ♖xc3 65. ♔g6 ♖c5 66. ♕g5



Position after: 66. ♕g5

66... ♔e4!

The black King is approaching, intending to box in the white King if he would capture the pawn on h5. This is much stronger and practical than

66... ♖xa5 which is probably also winning after 67. ♔xh5 ♔e4

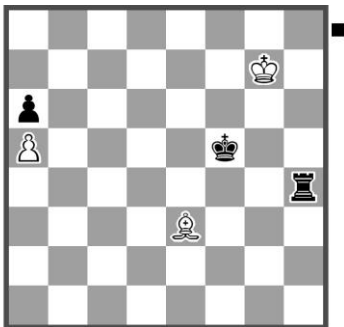
67. ♔xh5 ♔f5 68. ♙d2 ♖c8

We can see the difference between a Rook and a Bishop in an open position. The Bishop is restricted to the squares of its own colour and can operate only on the diagonals, while the Rook is very mobile on all the files and lines.

69. ♔h6

Otherwise White loses his Bishop. For example: 69. ♙h6 ♖g8 70. ♙g5 ♖h8+ 71. ♙h6 ♔f6.

69... ♖h8+ 70. ♔g7 ♖xh4 71. ♙e3



Position after: 71. ♙e3

71... ♖e4

Once again, the Rook can cut off the white King while providing a safe route for his own King.

72. ♙b6 ♖e6 73. ♔f7 ♔e5 74. ♙d4+ ♔d5 75. ♙f2

75. ♙b6 ♖xb6 76. axb6 ♔c6 77. ♔e6 ♔xb6+

75... ♖c6 76. ♙e3 ♔c4 77. ♙b6 ♔b5

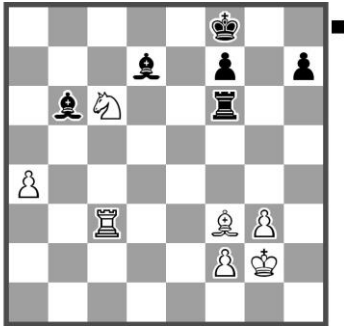
White resigned. He cannot prevent the final exchange on b6, after which the pawn ending is lost because the white King is too far from the a-pawn.

0-1

Simplification in an inferior position

If our opponent has the material or positional advantage, we might come closer to a draw by exchanging the correct piece. It can diminish the pressure or lead to a theoretical draw.

♟ Fontaine, Robert
 ♚ Rozentalis, Eduardas
 🌐 Istanbul 2003



Black to move.

35... ♗xc6

The opposite coloured Bishops provide good drawing chances to the weaker side. Of course not always and especially not if more pieces remain on the board. But this option is always worth considering. If you made the correct evaluation it could save your game and day!

36. ♖xc6

Unfortunately for White he can't avoid a Rooks exchange because of the f2-pawn.

36... ♖xc6 **37.** ♗xc6 h6

It is advisable for Black to put his pawns on the squares of his Bishop's colour so it can protect them.

38. f3 ♖e7 **39.** ♖h3 ♗a5!

It is always important to find optimal squares for your pieces. The Bishop goes to e1 where it will be able to prevent the white passed pawn moving to a5 meanwhile attacking the white g3-pawn.

40. ♖g4 ♗e1 **41. f4**

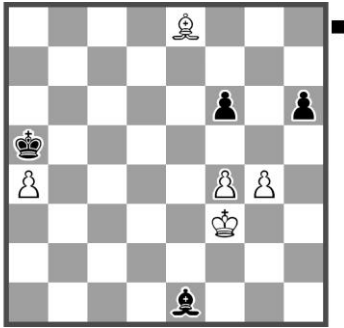
White cannot win after 41. ♖f4. For example: 41... f6 42. g4 ♖d6 43. ♗e8 ♖c7 44. ♖f5 ♗h4 45. ♖g6 ♗g5 46. ♖f5 ♗h4 47. f4 ♗g3=

41... ♖d6

Now the black King goes to the queenside to stop the a-pawn. The black Bishop will be able to solve all the problems on the kingside by himself.

42. ♗e8 f6 **43.** ♗g6 ♖c5 **44.** ♖f3 ♖b4 **45.** ♗e8 ♖a5 **46. g4**

(see diagram next page)



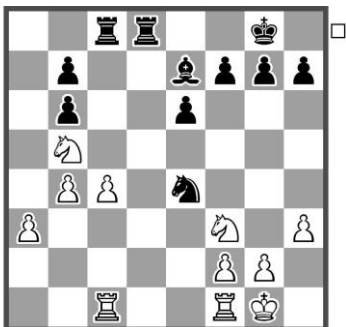
Position after: 46. g4

46... ♗d2!

After the g-pawn has moved forward, the black Bishop immediately aims at the f-pawn. Eventually, this one will have to move to f5. The Bishop will occupy his final position on g5 and both black pawns will be firmly protected. ½-½

Another example:

- ♗ Roentalis, Eduardas
- ♜ Kramnik, Vladimir
- ♁ Berlin 1995



White to move. Despite of the material equality Black's pieces exert some pressure. This is not the end of the world but some

caution is needed. Otherwise Black will attack white's pawns on the queenside.

27. ♖fd1!

White temporarily sacrifices a pawn in order to exchange his passive piece.

27. ♖fe1 ♘d6 28. ♘xd6 ♖xd6

27... ♖xd1+ 28. ♖xd1 ♖xc4



Position after: 28... ♖xc4

29. ♘d2!

Another important exchange. White calculated this well in advance!

Otherwise he could find himself in trouble after the natural: 29. ♖d7? ♖c1+ 30. ♙h2 ♗f6 31. ♖xb7 g5! And Black's attack on the kingside looks very dangerous and promising.

29... ♘xd2 30. ♖xd2

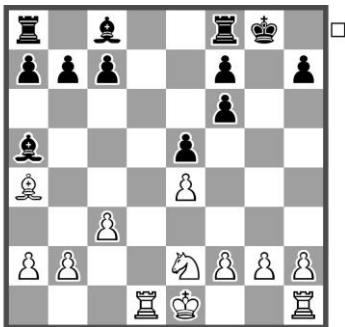
All the active black pieces are exchanged. White is now ready for 31. ♖d7. He will regain the pawn and his problems are gone.

30... ♖c1+ ½-½

Exchange of the most active piece of the opponent

By exchanging the most active or dangerous piece of your opponent the whole assessment of the position can alter. After such an exchange he might be stuck with only bad pieces, while ours could become active and more pleasant.

♙ Yudasin, Leonid
♚ Rozentalis, Eduardas
♁ Vilnius 1995



White to move. Black has the bishop pair. And given the chance he will improve his pawn structure by ...f5.

15. ♗d7!

Although the white Bishop already made at least 3 moves in the opening against none by the opposing Bishop, this exchange is essential in gaining the advantage.

15... ♗xd7 16. ♖xd7 ♖fd8 17. ♖xd8+ ♗xd8 18. ♞g3

Without his light squared Bishop Black can't prevent White's occupation of the weak f5-square. This is a clear strategic victory for White.

18... ♔f8

Maybe Black should have moved his Bishop to the kingside with 18... ♗b6 followed by ...♗c5 and ...♗f8.

19. ♞f5 ♔e8 20. h4!

The white Rook is activated through h3.

20... ♔d7

Black occupies the open d-file but he can't use it because White controls the central squares: 20... ♖d3 21. ♔e2.

21. ♖h3 ♖g8

White threatened to penetrate through the g-file. To prevent this Black has to relocate his Rook giving up the d-file.

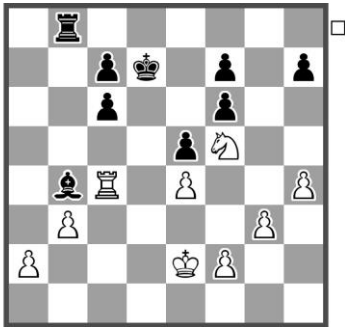
22. ♖d3+ ♔e6 23. g3 ♗b6 24. ♖d5 a6 25. c4 ♗a7 26. c5



Position after: 26. c5

Because of the bad pawn structure, white's pieces obtained excellent squares, while Black's pieces had to retreat to very passive ones. Black's position is hopeless.

26... ♖b8 27. c6 bxc6 28. ♖a5 ♖a7 29. ♖xa6 ♖b6 30. ♖a4 ♖b8 31. b3 ♖c5 32. ♖c4 ♖b4+ 33. ♔e2 ♔d7



Position after: 33... ♔d7

Black activated his pieces but he sits on many weak pawns.

34. ♔f3 ♖f8 35. ♔g4

To attack the weak h-pawn the white King travels to the kingside.

35... ♖b6 36. ♖a4 ♖b8 37. ♞e3

The Knight leaves his perfect outpost.

37. ♔h5 was probably better but it doesn't matter as White is winning anyway.

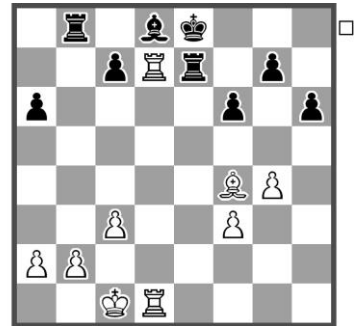
37... ♖c5 38. ♞d1 ♔e6 39. ♖c4 ♖g8+ 40. ♔h5 ♔d6 41. ♔h6

The h7-pawn is lost. Nothing can save Black.

41... ♖d4 42. ♖c2 c5 43. ♖e2 c4 44. ♔xh7 ♖g6 45. bxc4 ♔c5 46. ♞e3 ♔b4 47. a4 c5 48. h5 ♖g5 49. ♞d5+ ♔xc4 50. ♞xf6 1-0

Another example:

♟️ Rozenalis, Eduardas
♟️ Glek, Igor
♜ Kazan 1996



White to move.

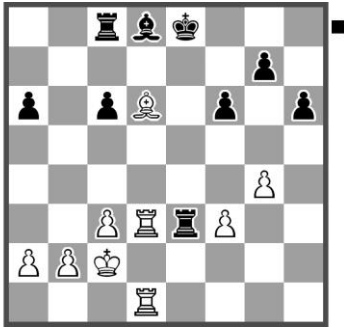
25. ♖7d2!

White has a space advantage and should not exchange Rooks at this stage.

25. ♖xe7+ ♔xe7 followed by 26... ♖b6 and Black can defend this slightly inferior position.

25... ♖c8 26. ♔c2 c6 27. ♖d6 ♖e3 28. ♖d3!

(see diagram next page)



Position after: 28. ♖d3!

First White managed to improve both his King and Bishop. Now he wants to exchange the only active black piece.

28... ♖e2+ 29. ♖1d2 ♖xd2+

Black exchanges this piece to ease the pressure.

In case of 29... ♖e1 White can further activate his King with 30. ♔b3.

30. ♖xd2 c5?

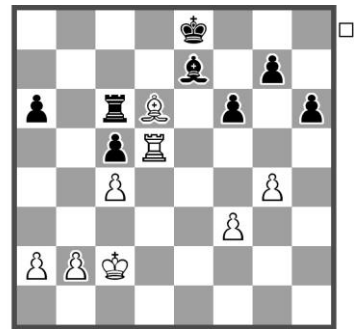
This is a clear strategical mistake. The advance of the pawn to a dark square becomes a target for the white Bishop. Moreover, White gets control over the very important d5-square.

Black should have tried to exchange his passive Bishop with 30... ♗c7! and after 31. ♗c5 (In the rook ending Black can hope to organize a passed pawn on the h-file, which compensates for the weakness of his queenside pawns. 31. ♗xc7 ♖xc7=) 31... ♗e5 and Black improved enormously the location of his Bishop.

31. c4

Fixing the pawn and seizing space.

31... ♖c6 32. ♖d5 ♗e7



Position after: 32... ♗e7

33. ♗f4!

White refrains from the bishop's exchange. The reason is clear. His Bishop is better and he has a space advantage.

In the rook ending after: 33. ♗xe7 ♔xe7 34. ♖c3 ♖e6 Black would have chances for a draw because he can create a passed pawn with ...g6 - ...f5 and ...h5.

33... ♔f7 34. ♔d3 ♖e6 35. ♗e3

All the white pieces are placed at perfect squares. The white Rook controls both sides: it attacks Black's pawns and is defending the kingside, preventing Black from organizing a passed h-pawn. Black has no counter play and can only make waiting moves.

35... ♖c8 36. f4