Isolani and Hanging Pawn Structures Made Simple

Cyrus Lakdawala

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Introduction

A scar can be either a location of our shame or a warrior's pride. Isolanis and hanging pawns are the same in that they range from weak to strong. A ruthless strategy of war used historically is that maiming the enemy soldier is better than killing since the enemy country is forced to expend money and resources to heal the maimed soldier, who is neutralized as a threat and will never again enter the battlefield. A weak isolani/unfavourable hanging pawns work exactly this way, and can be even worse than being down a pawn. The rot of our core weakness has a way of spreading to the healthy portion of our position. An isolani or hanging pawns, like a marriage, can be a source of either joy or misery. To assume or play against an isolani or hanging pawns is to enter a winner-take-all culture. If our isolani or hanging pawns later turn into a weakness in a late middlegame or ending, that factor alone can take the rest of our position down via guilt by association. To players new to the game, an isolani structure may appear as a deformity. When we become more experienced players, we sense functionality, since an isolani (usually a d4–pawn when playing the white pieces) creates the following potential:

1. The isolani allows us to exert greater central influence.

2. The d4–isolani allows us hooks for pieces on e5 and even potentially c5.

3. Number 1 on the list means that White may later have chances to build a kingside attack.

4. The isolani, at least early in the game, is weak in name only since we can easily defend it as many times as - or more than - when it is attacked.

The downsides of an isolated d4–pawn are:

1. Black may later seize control of and occupy the d5–hole directly in front of the isolani.

2. If too many pieces are traded, the isolani can turn into a liability in an ending or late middlegame.

What is an Isolani?

An isolani is a pawn which is missing the support of our pawns on adjacent files. An isolani is generally a central pawn - usually the d4–pawn for White or the d5–pawn for Black - that cannot be protected by other pawns. Isolanis and hanging pawns often arise from openings like the Queen's Gambit Accepted, Declined and Tarrasch Variations, the Sicilian Alapin and the Tarrasch Variation of the French Defence.

What are Hanging Pawns?

Hanging pawns link arms as they sit side by side with no friendly pawns on adjacent sides. They are most seen on the c and d-files. They operate on essentially the same principles as isolanis where they provide us with central space, the potential for dynamic piece play and, if we get lucky, an attack. On the downside, like isolanis, they can turn into liabilities if they get blockaded or if too many piece swaps are allowed. Advancing one can often weaken the other.

The Basic Laws Which Govern Isolani and Hanging Pawns Positions

Isolani and hanging pawns positions are governed by these two critical laws:

1. A crowded middlegame with all or most of the pieces remaining on the board tends to favour the side with the isolani and hanging pawns, since they encroach on the defender's piece activity and may help launch a direct attack upon the defender's king.

2. Conversely, simplified positions cause concern for the isolani/hanging pawns side, since they have a way of turning into weaknesses in late middlegames and endings.

Numbers 1 and 2 on the list lead to the Principles: Don't swap pieces without a good reason if you own either an isolani or hanging pawns; when defending against an isolani and hanging pawns, trade as many pieces off as possible.

This Book's Structure

Chapter 1: An Uneasy Equilibrium

In this chapter, we examine positions where the isolani's/hanging pawns' strengths are balanced by their potential weaknesses. We look at *every* Tarrasch French Defence game ever played between two of the greatest practitioners of both sides: Anatoly Karpov versus his great rival, Viktor Korchnoi. Karpov played the white pieces in every game while Korchnoi went on to effectively demonstrate the dynamism of both isolani and hanging pawns structures.

Chapter 2: The Isolani Launches an Attack

An isolani can be a burden to be carried, or it can infuse our position with energy for an attack, initiative, or strategic bind. In chapters 2 and 3, we look at positions where the isolani is a powerful tool.

Chapter 3: The Dynamic Isolani

The word isolani stems from its root, "isolation," which emits a negative vibe. In this chapter, we see this isn't always the case. We look at examples where the isolani is a source of power rather than a liability.

Chapter 4: The Disheveled, No-account Isolani

The no-account, bad isolani is a societal parasite who leaches off our position without contributing anything in return. In this book, we learn to identify a bad version of an isolani. Nursing a weak isolani can actually be worse than losing the pawn itself, since the energy and resources we invest into protecting the weakness can turn our position passive, leaching away our position's vitality. In such positions, it may even be better to sacrifice our weak isolani or liquidate our hanging pawns in a two-for-one special, rather than take on the hopeless job of nursing the patients back to health.

Chapter 5: Isolani Versus Isolani

We examine positions where both sides own an isolani, often with one side carrying the bigger burden of defending it.

Chapter 6: The Hanging Pawns Launch an Attack

Everything I said about an isolani launching an attack applies to this chapter as well!

Chapter 7: The Dynamic Hanging Pawns

In this chapter, we look at positions where the hanging pawns either squeeze the opponent or allow us enhanced piece play, due to our extra central space.

Chapter 8: The Disheveled, No-account Hanging Pawns

In this chapter, we examine positions where the hanging pawns are a liability.

Keep in mind this is not an openings book, which means that the moves will be provided in the early stages of (most of) the games, yet will not be explained in excruciating detail. We essentially bypass the opening and only begin to dig deeply when an isolani or hanging pawns position arises. In each chapter, the games are mostly presented chronologically so you view how historical interpretation of isolanis and hanging pawns developed over time. Let's explore both the known and the hidden corridors of two of the most critically important pawn structures in chess.

Chapter 1

An Uneasy Equilibrium

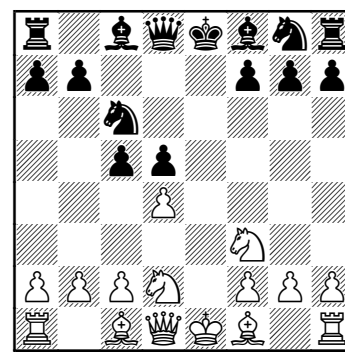
If your desire is to go beyond the superficial and generate a deep understanding of isolani and hanging pawns positions, the place to start is the early battles between Anatoly Karpov and his eternal challenger, Viktor Korchnoi, who even late in his chess life defied the cruel hand of Time and Impermanence by playing at a world class level, even into his late 40s and early 50s.

In their 1971 training match, Karpov drew blood with a win against Korchnoi's isolani. The streak of one-in-a-row ended for good. From that point on, going into their 1974 Candidates Final Match (which turned out to be a match for the World Championship, since Fischer refused to defend his title, and like Magnus Carlsen after him, voluntarily abdicated his title of World Chess Champion), Korchnoi held Karpov to seven draws with the black pieces starting with an isolani position out of his Tarrasch French, and sometimes ending up with hanging pawns.

Korchnoi in that match deviated twice from his French Defence with a Dragon and Petroff's Defence, both ending in disastrous losses. I keep speculating on the thought: would Korchnoi have taken down Karpov had he stuck with the black side of the Tarrasch French, defending the isolani positions? Then, in their 1978 world championship match, Korchnoi again held Karpov to two draws with his French Tarrasch isolani mastery. One can only wonder whether Korchnoi would have defeated Karpov in one of their three matches, had he stuck with the French Tarrasch, since he lost multiple games with other openings. These games form a perfect blueprint of how to play against/with the isolani and hanging pawns, and bear careful study.

(1) A.Karpov-V.Korchnoi
Leningrad training match, 1971
French Defence

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 c5 4.♘gf3 ♘c6 5.exd5 exd5



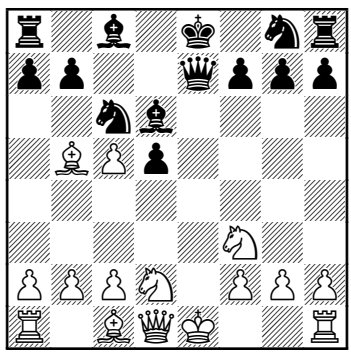
Can you feel the freedom? It's the cleanest air Black ever breathed.

Sure, Black may later adopt a possibly weak isolani on d5, yet it is a spacious home. Black's pieces are granted instant freedom with the future isolani.

6.♗b5 ♗d6

I don't much like Black's position after the time-wasting, isolani-evading move 6...c4!? 7.0-0 ♗d6 8.b3 cxb3 9.axb3 ♘ge7. I prefer White due to the superior and more flexible structure.

7.dxc5 ♕e7+!?



To my mind, it's a strange idea to assume an isolani and then offer to swap queens. Yet Korchnoi did just that multiple times, confident in the drawing power of his isolani position. More normal would be 7...♗xc5 which reserves e7 for the g8–knight.

8.♕e2 ♗xc5

Safer is 8...♕xe2+ 9.♔xe2 ♗xc5.

9.♘b3

9.♘e5! looks dangerous for Black. 9...♘f6 10.♘xc6 ♕xe2+ 11.♔xe2 a6 12.♘b3 axb5 13.♘xc5 bxc6 14.♗e3. Black's queenside is riddled with dark-square punctures. Now saying this, the engine gives White only an edge after 14...♘d7. Korchnoi may have felt confident in his ability to hold a draw, due to the presence of bishops of opposite colours.

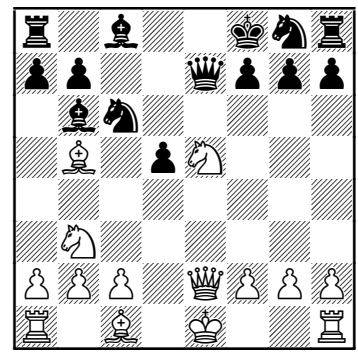
9...♗b6?!

Necessary was 9...♕xe2+ 10.♔xe2 ♗d6 11.♖d1 ♘ge7 12.♔f1. There are two likely results: White wins, or the game ends in a draw.

10.♘e5!

Now Karpov sees it. Korchnoi is in trouble, since the c6 knight isn't so easy to defend.

10...♔f8!



Korchnoi finds the only move, which is to sacrifice a pawn.

11.♗f4!?

This Morphyesque decision spurns the material in favour of rapid development. Karpov also gets the better of it by accepting with 11.♗xc6! bxc6 12.♘xc6 ♕xe2+ 13.♔xe2 ♗a6+ 14.♔f3 ♖c8 15.♘cd4 ♘e7 16.♗e3 ♘g6 17.g3 ♘e5+ 18.♔g2 ♘c4 19.♗c1!. Sure, Black picked up the bishop pair, a development lead and some queenside pressure. But is it worth a full pawn in an ending? I doubt it.

11...♕f6

This multi-purpose move hits the f4–bishop, defends the c6–knight and creates potential latent threats to the b2–pawn. The engine suggests lashing out with 11...g5! 12.♗g3 h5! 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♗xc6 ♕xe2+ 15.♔xe2 ♗a6+ 16.♔d2 ♖c8 17.♗d7 ♖d8 18.♗f5 ♘e7 19.♗d3 ♗xd3 20.♔xd3 f6 21.a4!. Black's threat of ...h5–h4 will be met with a4–a5!. 21...a5 22.h4 ♘g6 23.hxg5 h4 24.♗h2 fxg5 25.c3 ♔f7. The engine only gives White a tiny edge. But a pawn is a pawn, and I still prefer White's position.

12.♗g3?!

12.♗xc6! bxc6 13.♗d2! ♘e7 14.0-0-0 ♘g6 15.♗c3 ♘xe5 16.♗xe5 ♕g6. Black's position looks unpleasant since he lags dangerously behind in development, where the derelict h8–rook will be out of play for a long time to come.

12...h5!

Miraculously, Korchnoi managed to achieve dynamic equality, despite his shady opening play.

13.h4 ♘ge7 14.0-0-0!?

Karpov is willing to give up his f-pawn to open the file against the black king. In reality, it's a sham sacrifice since he regains the pawn immediately. Karpov could have played the safer version by giving up the bishop pair and switching to a hanging pawns position with 14.♗xc6 bxc6 15.0-0-0 ♔g8 and balanced chances.

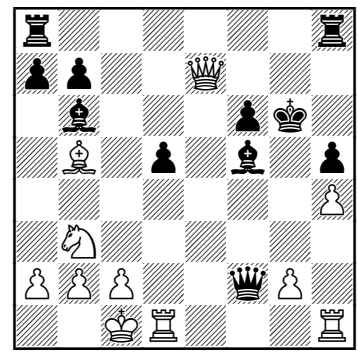
14...♘xe5 15.♗xe5 ♕xf2 16.♗xg7+!

This regains the pawn, at the cost of handing over the bishop pair and control over the dark squares.

16...♔xg7 17.♕xe7 ♗f5

Threatening mate on c2.

18.♕e5+ f6 19.♕e7+ ♔g6



How would you assess this crazy position? The engine calls it dead even! White must give up the exchange to defend the mating threat on c2.

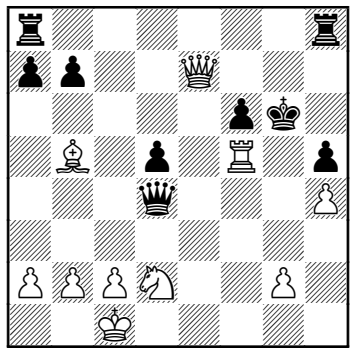
20.♖d2!

Karpov correctly avoids 20.♘d2?? ♖ac8 21.c3 ♗c5! 22.♕e2 ♕xe2 23.♗xe2 ♗e3 24.♖hf1 d4. White is completely busted since he must hand over the exchange on f5. If 25.c4? b5 26.b3 d3 27.♗f3 bxc4 White is crushed.

20...♗e3 21.♖f1 ♗xd2+ 22.♘xd2 ♕d4?

Korchnoi goes wrong in the irrational complications. 22...♕b6! The game is dead even, according to the engine. 23.♖xf5! ♔xf5 24.♗d3+ ♔f4 25.♕e2 ♖hg8 26.♘f1. Now, g2–g3+ is in the air. 26...♖ad8 27.g3+ ♖xg3 28.♕d2+! ♔g4 29.♕e2+ ♔f4! 30.♕d2+ Draw!

23.♖xf5!!



A malignant force approaches. Something - rather than someone - enters Korchnoi's home. Karpov's dream is to amass power at any cost. The second exchange sacrifice is decisive.

23...♔xf5 24.♗d3+

Mi casa es su casa! Welcome! Welcome! Come on in!

24...♔f4 25.♕d6+?

This move should have blown the win. The engine found 25.♕e2!! ♕e3 26.g3+! ♕xg3 27.♘f1 ♕h3 28.♕e7! f5 29.♕c7+ ♔f3 30.♘d2+ ♔f2 31.♕f4+ ♔g1 32.♕d4+ ♔h1 33.♗e2! ♖ag8 34.♘f3 ♕g4 35.♕d1+ ♔g2 36.♕g1+ ♔h3 37.♕h2#.

25...♕e5!

Oh Lord! How do we interpret this irrational mess? White is down two exchanges yet hunting Black's dangerously exposed king. The engine says Korchnoi evaded his brush with death and the game is dead even again, since White's attack is shorn of its previous terror.

26.♕b4+ d4!?

Korchnoi, dwelling in his normal state of a fever of creation, is probably playing for the full point. 26...♔g3 27.♘f1+ ♔xg2 28.♕d2+ ♔f3 29.♘h2+ ♔g3 30.♘f1+ ♔xh4 31.♕f2+ ♔g5 32.♕g2+ ♔h4 33.♕h1+ ♔g5 34.♕g1+ ♔h4. The game ends in perpetual check.

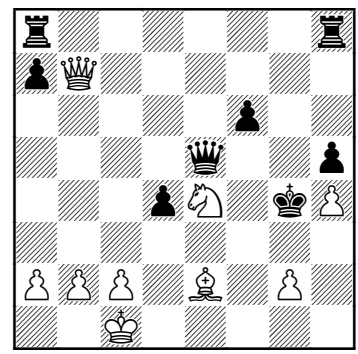
27.♘e4 ♔f5!?

This is a scary move, yet White's knight lacks a dangerous discovered check. Objectively best is 27...♔g4! 28.♕e1♕f4+ 29.♔b1♖ae8 30.♕d1+ ♔f5! (30...♔xh4?? 31.♕h1+! This is even stronger than winning Black's queen with a pawn push to g3. 31...♔g4 32.♕h3#) 31.♘d6+ ♔e6 32.♘xe8 ♖xe8 33.♕xh5 ♖e7 34.a4 ♕e5. Chances are dead even, according to the engine.

28.♕xb7

28.♕b3! is slightly more accurate.

28...♔g4 29.♗e2+



29...♔xh4??

For most of us a built-in primitive survival instinct is embedded within our DNA. Not so much for the chronically ambitious. How many points has raw ambition cost us?

Sometimes we are wise to embrace paranoia since it may keep us alive! Correct is to take the draw with 29... ♔f5 30.♗d3 ♔g4 31.♗e2+ ♔f5 32.♗d3.

30.g3+!

Now Karpov is granted an unexpected windfall.

30...♔h3 31.♘f2+! ♔h2

31...♔xg3 32.♕f3+ ♔h2 33.♕h3+ ♔g1 34.♕f1+ ♔h2 35.♕h1+ ♔g3 36.♘e4+! wins Black's queen and the game.

32.♕h1+

It's common knowledge that White's queen flunked out of charm school. Black is soon going to lose his queen or his king.

32...♔xg3

Black's dream of a win - or even a draw - is about to deflate.

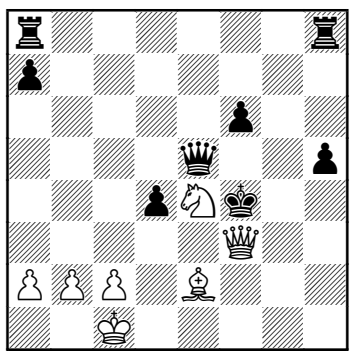
33.♘e4+!

Korchnoi is confronted with a disquieting truth. He is only left with unhappy choices.

33...♔f4

33...♕xe4 34.♕xe4 is also an easy win for White.

34.♕f3# 1-0



Black's king becomes acutely aware of his own mortality. When we get mated on the board in humiliating fashion, we are reminded of those backless hospital gowns which display our posterior for all the world to see and criticize. Karpov won the first Tarrasch French against Korchnoi, yet was unable to duplicate the feat in all their remaining French Tarrasch games against his great rival.

(2) A.Karpov-V.Korchnoi

Candidates final game 4, Moscow, 1974

French Defence

Some games are meaner than others, while some are kind and gentle. Don't expect thrills and chills in this game, which is dry, yet highly instructive in how to play against and with an isolani.

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 c5 4.exd5 exd5 5.♘gf3 ♘c6 6.♗b5

In this game, Karpov plays his bishop to b5 and then later back to e2. I generally move the bishop to e2 right away with 6.♗e2 hoping to save a tempo.

6...♗d6 7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.0-0 ♘ge7 9.♘b3 ♗d6

Why move to d6, rather than the more natural b6–square? Because White will simply challenge with c2–c3, Re1 and Be3, inducing Black's bishop to back off to c7.

10.c3 ♗g4 11.♘bd4 0-0 12.♗e2 ♖e8 13.♖e1 a6 14.♗g5

Karpov tries to provoke ...f7–f6, which would weaken e6.

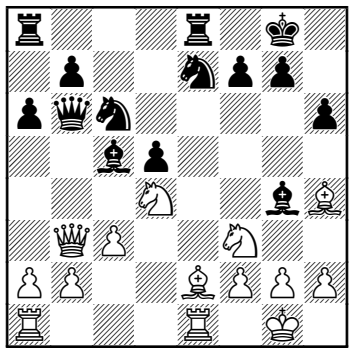
14...h6

14...♕c7 is also possible.

15.♗h4 ♕b6

Also possible is 15...♕c7 16.♗g3.

16.♕b3 ♗c5!



Once again, Korchnoi demonstrates that Black should hold the ending despite the isolani. His last move violates one principle while following another:

1. He violates the Principle: *The side with the isolani should avoid queen swaps since the isolani tends to become more of a liability in an ending*.

2. He follows the Principle: *Pressure the square in FRONT of the isolani*, which in this case is d4.

17.♕xb6 ♗xb6

Surprisingly, Black's property values have not plummeted after the queen swap and the engine calls the position even.

18.♗d3

18.♗xe7!? ♖xe7 19.♗d3 ♖xe1+ 20.♖xe1 ♘xd4 21.♘xd4 ♔f8. Black stands no worse since the bishop pair and enhanced dark-square control compensate for the potential weakness of the isolani.

18...♔f8!

Principle: *Centralize your king in an ending*.

19.a3

Such a move indicates that Karpov is experiencing difficulty in improving his position.

19...♘xd4 20.♘xd4 ♗xd4

Korchnoi hands over his bishop pair to saddle Karpov with his own isolani.

21.cxd4

No more isolani. 21.♗xe7+ ♖xe7 22.cxd4 ♖c8. The fact that White owns a technically good bishop is just an advantage on paper since Black will easily hold a draw.

21...♘f5!

Now we reach an equal isolani versus isolani situation.

22.f3

The position is a gloomy place for someone who hopes to win. Black stands no worse no matter how Karpov proceeds. 22.♗xf5 ♗xf5 23.♖ac1 ♖xe1+ 24.♖xe1 f6 is an almost certain draw.

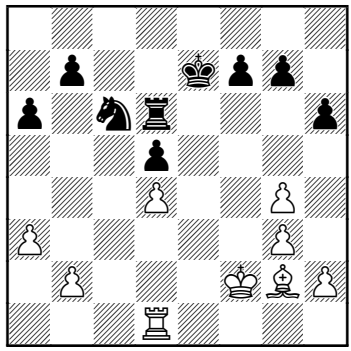
22...♘xh4 23.fxg4 ♘g6 24.g3

Karpov tries his luck in a bishop against knight situation. But with a relatively symmetrical structure, the knight is no worse. 24.♗xg6 fxg6. The game will end in a draw.

24...♘e7 25.♗f1 ♘c6 26.♗g2 ♖xe1+ 27.♖xe1 ♖d8

This is slightly more accurate than 27...♘xd4 28.♖d1.

28.♔f2 ♖d6 29.♖d1 ♔e7



I cannot truthfully claim the position bustles with industry. The ending is a clear draw and the remainder isn't so interesting.

30.b4 ♖d8 31.♔e3 ♔d6 32.♖f1 f6 33.♖c1 ♖c8 34.♖c5 ♘e7 35.♗f1

Discouraging ...b7–b6.

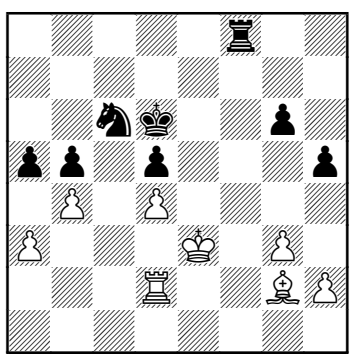
35...♖e8

Black can just move around and do nothing, since White has no way to improve his position.

36.♔d2 f5!?

White can't make progress if Black just shuffles with 36...♘c6 37.♗g2 ♘e7.

37.♗e2 fxg4 38.♗xg4 ♖f8 39.♖c2 g6 40.♔e3 h5 41.♗h3 ♘c6 42.♖d2 b5 43.♗g2 a5!



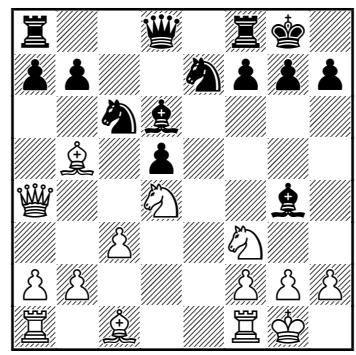
The game is dead drawn if all the queenside pawns are eliminated.

44.h4 axb4 45.axb4 ♖e8+ ½–½

45...♖e8+ 46.♔f4 ♘xb4 47.♔g5 ♖e3 48.♔xg6 ♖xg3+ 49.♔xh5 ♘c6 50.♗f1 b4 51.♗b5. The game will end in an inevitable draw.

(3) A.Karpov-V.Korchnoi
Candidates final game 8, Moscow, 1974
French Defence

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 c5 4.exd5 exd5 5.♘gf3 ♘c6 6.♗b5 ♗d6 7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.0-0 ♘ge7 9.♘b3 ♗d6 10.c3 ♗g4 11.♘bd4 0-0 12.♕a4



This move adds heat to the c6–knight, while also latently endangering the g4–bishop with White's queen.

12...♗h5

12...♕d7 scores better for Black. Korchnoi tried this in game 16 of the match.

13.♖e1

13.♗xc6?! bxc6 14.♘xc6?? Yes, some chess engines really were this stupid in 1996. 14...♘xc6 15.♕xc6 ♖c8 16.♕a4 (16.♕a6 ♗xf3 17.gxf3

♖c4! is also quite miserable for White) 16...♗xf3 17.gxf3 ♖c4 18.b4 ♕h4 19.♖d1 ♕h3 20.f4 ♖xf4!, 0–1 Comp Turning Point-Vaganian,R. The Hague AEGON 1996.

13...♕c7!

Threatening ...Nxd4, after which White is unable to defend the h2–pawn.

14.h3 ♗g6

This way Korchnoi cuts off Bd3.

15.♗g5 a6 16.♗f1

16.♗xe7 is well met with 16...♘xe7!.

16...h6 17.♗xe7

17.♗e3 ♗e4 also looks fine for Black.

17...♘xe7!

17...♗xe7?! 18.♘xc6 bxc6 19.♘e5! wins a pawn, since if 19...♖fc8? 20.♕xc6!.

18.♖ad1

"By keeping a firm blockade on Q4 (d4), White maintains the better position," wrote Svetozar Gligoric. I disagree and so does the modern-day engine. Black picked up the bishop pair and his d5–isolani looks perfectly safe. I wouldn't mind playing either side of the position and call it dynamically balanced.

18...♘c6

Principle: *Challenge the square in front of your isolani.*

19.♗d3!

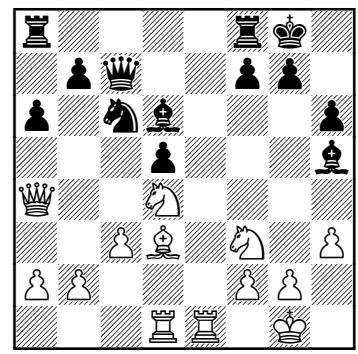
Principles:

1. The side without the isolani benefits from swaps.

2. If your opponent owns the bishop pair, swap one of them off.

19...♗h5!!

The faith-healer channels the power of the divine to heal the supplicant! Wow! Korchnoi offers a strategic exchange sacrifice which, as it turns out, is perfectly sound. However, one requires an exceedingly high calculation security clearance to play such a move, since one miscalculation and Black loses. 19...♘xd4 is also playable. 20.♕xd4 ♗c5! 21.♕h4 (21.♕xd5 ♖ad8 22.♕e5 ♕b6 is no worse for Black) 21...♖ae8 22.♖xe8 ♖xe8 23.♗xg6 ♖e2! 24.♖e1! ♖xe1+ 25.♘xe1 fxg6 26.♕g4 ♕c6 and Black looks just fine here as well.



20.g4!?

20.♗e2 is too wimpy to extract an edge for White.

20...♗g6 21.♕c2!?

Karpov, refusing to weave his way through Korchnoi's obstacle course, perhaps wisely, plays it safe. Let's see what happens if White accepts the exchange offer. Trying to calculate such a line at the board is akin to trying to read a shadow.

a) 21.♗xg6 fxg6 22.♘e6 ♕f7. Now if 23.♘xf8?! (Buying a lottery ticket is generally a lousy retirement