

Cyrus Lakdawala

Korchnoi

move by move

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the US.

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Series Foreword

The *Move by Move* format is designed to be interactive, and is based on questions asked by both teachers and students. It aims – as much as possible – to replicate chess lessons. All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions and to complete exercises, to test their skills in key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess.

Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms,
Everyman Chess

Introduction

“I don’t study; I create.” – Victor Korchnoi

From the ashes and pain of the Nazi blockade of Leningrad arose the ultimate survivor, the man who I believe was the strongest chess player never to become World Champion. Victor Korchnoi was born March 23rd, 1931, the unlikeliest of chess deities. He never really stood out as a junior and looked like he was destined to be no more than a high-level grandmaster – but certainly no chess god. Victor Korchnoi proved everyone wrong.

In the old Soviet Union, there were two paths to greatness: lineage, mixed with the favour of the ruling authority, or the brute force of the commoner/warlord. Korchnoi, of course, belonged in the latter category. Never the obedient son of the ruling communists, he was always in trouble with them, and over and over suffered their punishments and veiled threats. He endured a brutal childhood, faced with crushing poverty, starvation (his grandmother’s cat, Machek – translating to “Cat” in Polish – disappeared, undoubtedly butchered and consumed by a hungry neighbour), and a pervading sense of impermanence from undergoing existence in a war-torn environment. Perhaps the intense psychological agony of the experience shaped his style and forged him into the ultimate survivor.

Man Who Would be King

On the walls of the San Diego Chess Club hang the portraits of all the World Champions. Korchnoi’s portrait is not among them and I wish it was. All through my teens and early adulthood, I knew of only one challenger to the world chess crown: Victor Korchnoi. It began with his 1974 Candidates’ Final match against then newcomer and seemingly unstoppable force, Anatoly Karpov. Was this a Candidates’ Final, or was it in reality a World Championship match? Nobody knew, since the erratic and mentally degrading Bobby Fischer, having retreated deeper into his delusional world, was unlikely to defend his crown. So the stakes couldn’t have been higher for Korchnoi and Karpov.

Most American Civil War experts tell us that Robert E. Lee was probably the superior general, who did more with less. Yet in the end, Ulysses S. Grant won the war. The moral: Superior numbers matter. Now the Soviet authorities saw Karpov as their rising star, and Korchnoi as a member of the old guard, who really had no chance in a head-to-head match against the god-like chess abilities of Fischer. The outspoken Korchnoi even had the audacity to announce that both he and Karpov would lose a match to Fischer! So they gifted Kar-

pov with the weight of their backing, while Korchnoi was subject to intense psychological pressure. At one stage, he couldn't even find a second for the match, all the top Soviet GMs having been intimidated by the ruling authority. The courageous David Bronstein (himself a candidate for strongest non-World Champion) stepped forward and offered to be Korchnoi's second – an act for which he was later punished by the Soviet authorities. The psychological pressure proved too great and Korchnoi trailed Karpov 0-3 by mid-match. Nobody thought he had a chance. But his critics failed to appreciate a hidden, monumental inner will. Having a low opinion of your opponent is a psychological blunder, since the next logical step is for you to underestimate him or her. Karpov did just that. After he decisively defeated Spassky (who he believed was his main threat), Karpov thought – not unreasonably – that he could walk over Korchnoi, on his inevitable collision course with Bobby Fischer. What Korchnoi lacked in raw talent, he made up for through the force of the energy concealed within his indomitable personality. Korchnoi closed in and won two games, to lose the match by a razor-thin 3-2 margin at the end.

Rivalry, pushed too far, morphed into full blown enmity. Korchnoi, embittered by the blatantly unfair treatment, defected to the Netherlands in 1976, at the excruciating cost of severing ties with both wife and son, now left behind in mother Russia. He chose freedom over blood and family.

But he was not done with his quest. Not by a long shot. It was Korchnoi who emerged once again as Karpov's challenger in their 1978 Baguio match in the Philippines. Once again, the match was permeated with controversy, including bizarre protests over the following subjects:

1. The X-raying of chairs.
2. The legality or illegality of Jolly Roger flags at the table.
3. Parapsychologist/hypnotists, with alleged mind-disrupting powers.
4. The changing of flavours of yogurt and the timing of the yogurt (just in case there were secret messages embedded; e.g. blueberry yogurt, two hours into the match = you stand worse, so play for a draw).

Once again, Karpov opened with a seemingly insurmountable 5-2 lead in a match to six games. Once again the impossible happened. Korchnoi fought back like a man possessed, to reach a 5-5 tied score. The winner of the next game would decide ownership of the title. Audacity sometimes surpasses cunning, but not in this instance. Destiny's fulcrum tilted against Korchnoi when Karpov survived his opponent's gusts and volleys to earn his sixth and decisive victory, and so retained his title.

Then came Merano, Italy 1981. You guessed it. Korchnoi once again emerged as challenger. This time the Soviet machine didn't mess around. It arbitrarily sentenced Korchnoi's son to two and a half years hard labour for evading military service – though everyone knew the crime was really the sins of the father visited upon the child, and a dirty method of adding another psychological burden to a man already burdened. The pressure was too great and there was no comeback this time. Korchnoi lost by a lopsided 6-2 score.

Could Korchnoi have beaten Karpov if the Soviets had not applied pressure in all three

matches? Who knows? I, for one, believe he would have beaten Karpov in one match if the psychological deck was even. Korchnoi reached the 99% mark, yet faltered somewhere in the final, necessary one percent needed to be World Champion. Simultaneous respect and contempt for a rival is commonplace in our chess universe. In the case of Korchnoi, I got the feeling in my research readings that he loathed Karpov the man, while deeply admiring Karpov the chess player.

Korchnoi's Style: The Great Stretcher of Limits

Imagine genetically altered Emanuel Lasker-like calculation power and defensive resourcefulness, astounding technical endgame aptitude, and psychological craftiness – combine it with Bent Larsen's fighting spirit and unbounded creativity, and within this hybrid emerges Korchnoi's style.

For the elite chosen few – Morphy, Capablanca and Fischer – their faculty of near-perfect intuition greatly outstripped their calculation abilities. They understood at a glance what other GMs could only prove after laboured periods of number-crunching analysis. Korchnoi represents the diametric opposite, relying almost exclusively on his computer-like power to outcalculate any and all opponents. Korchnoi's games, unlike those of Morphy, Capa and Fischer, lacked the penchant for the perfect. Instead, Korchnoi's moves appear (to me at least!) as if he randomly shifts from one folly to the next. Despite encyclopaedic opening knowledge, Korchnoi's fertile imagination lures him to reject the safety of the known, in order to reach out to and grasp the dangerous unrevealed.

Throughout the book, we witness some outrageously eccentric opening ideas – not to mention perplexingly inscrutable middlegame and endgame ideas as well. Korchnoi has the nasty habit of attempting to solve the unsolvable – and if he can't have his way, then he resorts to Plan B: Enter Lasker mode and contrive some bizarre idea (sound or unsound!) which confuses the living daylights out of his opponents. If you don't believe me, please fast forward to the diagram in the introduction to Chapter One! In researching this book, as I played through Korchnoi's games, I felt like a child lapping up fairy tales. You experience a palpable sense of wonder, of fantasy, engendered by imagination and willingness to risk all – even his place in history – for experimentation's sake. So utterly perplexing are his ideas, that it's difficult to say whether they merit a "!!", a "??", or maybe both, since we pass through phantom landscapes and alien architecture – and I, your befuddled annotator, at times lack context to praise or condemn, even with the computer's assistance.

This was probably the most difficult book I have ever written. At one point, Korchnoi's preposterous move algorithms, which wandered in and out of some netherworld wherelessness, got so embedded into my head, that I woke up with a start, at 3:00 a.m. one morning and raced to the computer to look up a Korchnoi game I dreamed and annotated in my sleep! Unfortunately, the game turned out to be a fictional product of REM sleep – he was on the black side of an Exchange Lopez against an unidentified dream opponent, and won with a cascade of perplexing double exclams! – and I was heartbroken to discover that my dream labours were wasted.

In the end, a chess player is the sum of his or her ideas over the board. Unlike Capa or Fischer, whose games are imbued with a quality of simplicity and inevitability, Korchnoi's, in antipodal contrast, feel like fevered dreams, full of night sweats, tossings and turnings, of ups and downs, double exclams and double question marks. His pieces dance tarantellas – never waltzes. His play teems with convoluted gyrations and bizarre choices, and the single constant I observe is that he nearly always rejects the simple for the complex. Korchnoi, impervious to suggestions for a peaceful outcome, invariably injects turmoil, even when trapped in the dullest of positions. So abstruse are Korchnoi's mental meanderings, that I often found myself drowning in the attempt to understand the mysteries of the maestro's unfathomable mind. His motivations and secrets are as closely guarded as a priest confessor's, and the alchemy of his mind is a place where dreams and imagination mingle into a single substance, not quite of this world.

Korchnoi: the Greatest Ever?

Well, yes, as it turns out, Korchnoi is probably the all-time greatest player when it comes to chess longevity. He ranked 85th in the world on the 2007 FIDE list, not an achievement to write books about – unless you happen to be a 75-year-old! He is the only player ever to have made it on to the top 100 list at that age, and his elder statesman status in the chess world perhaps surpasses achievements of senior candidate greats, such as Lasker and Smyslov. In this book we routinely see Korchnoi in his 70s, still able to smack down world-class players. In December of 2012, the then 82-year-old Korchnoi suffered a debilitating stroke, probably ending the legendary, 5000+ game playing career of the maestro – though I, for one, wouldn't be shocked at a triumphant return to the battlefield.

A “Typical” Korchnoi Game!?

Is there such a thing as a “typical” Korchnoi game? Perhaps the answer is to look for a game filled with exclams and blunders, with outlandish notions and arcane mysteries – like the following game.

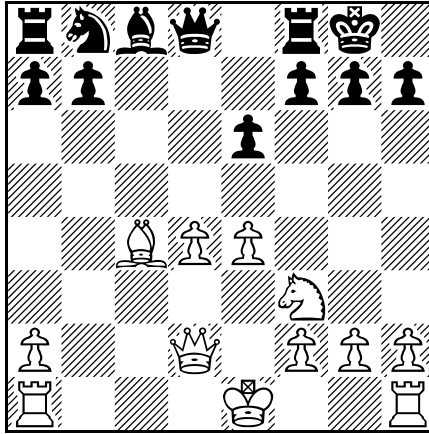
Game 1
V.Korchnoi-M.Najdorf
Wijk aan Zee 1971
Semi-Tarrasch Defence

1 c4 ♘f6 2 ♘c3 e6 3 ♘f3 d5 4 d4 c5 5 cxd5 ♗xd5

The Semi-Tarrasch; Black hands his opponent a Grünfeld-like centre in return for a queenside pawn majority. 5...exd5 is inadvisable, in my opinion, since White gets a favourable Tarrasch, where the f6-knight has been developed prematurely, with 6 ♗g5 ♗e7 7 e3 ♗e6 8 dxc5 ♗xc5 9 ♗b5+ ♗c6 10 ♗xf6! (the simple 10 0-0 looks promising for White as well) 10...♔xf6 11 ♗xd5 ♗xd5 12 ♔xd5 ♗b4+ 13 ♖f1 0-0 14 ♗b3 and I'm not so sure Black

extracted full compensation for the pawn, despite his lead in development, B.Macieja-R.Jedynak, Polish Team Championship 2009.

6 e4 Nxc3 7 bxc3 cxd4 8 cxd4 Bb4+ 9 Qd2 Qxd2+ 10 Kxd2 0-0 11 Qc4



Success or failure of an eventual d4-d5 break constitutes the universal definer of this line.

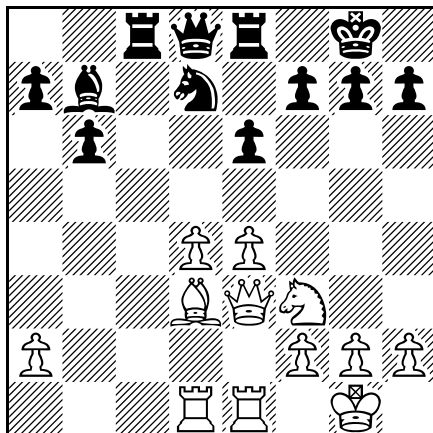
11...b6

As we discover in the book, Korchnoi is attracted to odd opening ideas – sometimes even dubious ones: 11... Nc6 12 0-0 e5?! 13 d5 Na5 14 Bac1 Nxc4 15 Bxc4 f6 16 Bfc1 Bf7 17 Ne1 b6 18 Nc2 Qa6 19 Bc3 Bc8 20 Nb4 (now c6 is a juicy hole for White's pieces) 20... Bxc3 21 Bxc3 Qb7 22 Nc6 with a clear advantage to White, P.Tregubov-V.Korchnoi, Odessa (rapid) 2008 – although Korchnoi, one of the all-time great defenders, managed to hang on to score a draw.

12 0-0

In a later game Korchnoi played 12 d5!? Qa6 13 Qxa6 Nxa6 14 d6!? Nc5 15 e5, when 15...f6 16 0-0 Bf7 17 Bad1 Bc8 18 Qe3 Bd7 19 exf6 gxf6 20 Nd4! Qe8 (20... Bxd6? is met by 21 Nxe6!) 21 Bfe1 Qf7 (21... Bxd6?? hangs the rook to 22 Qg3+) 22 h4 left Black's king feeling slightly insecure, V.Korchnoi-H.Mecking, Hastings 1971/72.

12... Qb7 13 Bfe1 Nd7 14 Bad1 Bc8 15 Qd3 Be8 16 Qe3! ?



Question: Doesn't this move walk into ...♖c3 - ?

Answer: It does, but Korchnoi factored that move in. Otherwise 16 ♖b1 ♗f8 17 h4 ♜e7 18 ♜e3 is normal, when White's strong centre and kingside attacking chances outweigh Black's queenside pawn majority and potential pressure on White's centre, T.Engqvist-V.Golod, Helsingor 2008.

16...♜c3 17 e5!?

Threatening ♗xh7+. White grabs kingside space and denies Black's knight use of f6, at the cost of weakening d5 and d4 and depleting mobility from his centre.

17...♞c7 18 ♗g5

Korchnoi openly displays hostile intent towards Black's king.

18...♗f8

18...h6 19 ♗e4 ♗xe4 20 ♞xe4 ♗f8 21 h4 is similar, and at some point White fans the coming attack by lifting a rook to g3.

19 ♗e4 ♗xe4

Black can't allow ♗d6.

20 ♞xe4 ♜d8 21 h4

Korchnoi stakes everything on kingside attacking chances.

21...♞e7 22 ♞g4

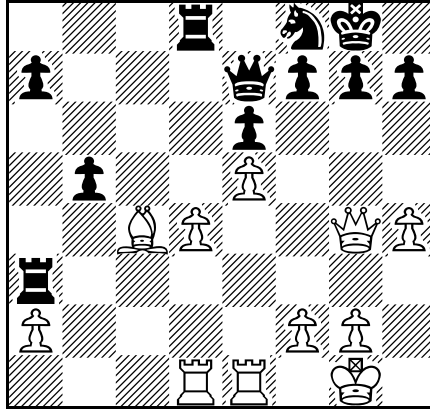
22 ♜e3 is possible but perhaps he was worried about 22...♜a3.

22...♜a3 23 ♗c4

The bishop watches d5 with the eyes of a troublemaker.

23...b5!

Principle: *When you are in possession of a wing majority, push it.*



24 ♙b3!

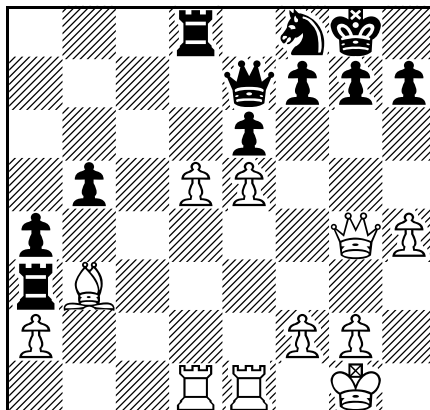
The beginning of an impossibly deep idea.

Question: Is this revelation or simply madness? I fail to see a correlation between this move and White's overall plan. Now White simply walks into ...a7-a5-a4!. Shouldn't he have just taken on b5 and exchanged pawns?

Answer: Korchnoi's move was not made with idle motives. This is a frightening example of his brute-force calculation abilities. He provokes a crisis and isn't interested in the equality of 24 ♙xb5 ♜xa2. Just watch what happens in the game.

24...a5 25 d5! a4?

Black should have let the offence slide with 25...exd5! 26 ♙xd5. This allows White's bishop free reign on its best square and White to keep attacking after 26...♜e8 27 h5, but this was infinitely better for Black than what he got in the game.



What now? White's bishop is pressed against the wall with nowhere palatable to run. If he plays 26 d6 ♖a7 27 ♙c2, then Black simply captures on a2 with two connected passers.

Exercise (combination alert): Despite appearances, Black's last move was incorrect. Find a better line than 26 d6 for White.

Answer: The entity, outside our space/time continuum, comes from nowhere, thirsting for the whereness of our material realm. Aberrant actions are often a symptom of distress, but not in this case.

26 dxe6!!

As danger for both sides increases, mutual fates hang on their decisions with greater urgency. Korchnoi discards his bishop without trepidation, as easily as a loose sweater, to attain a crushing future bind. Korchnoi works out an unbelievably deep combination, which to the ordinary mind (i.e. your writer's!) feels as if it reaches the limits of human cogitation. I had the opportunity to watch Korchnoi's analysis against opponents at the 1983 US Open in Pasadena. His mental clarity and distance of calculation was staggering – beyond what I thought was humanly possible.

26...axb3!

The only move.

a) 26...♗xe6?? 27 ♙xe6 fxe6 28 ♖xd8+ ♗xd8 29 ♗xe6+ ♙f8 30 ♗f5+ ♙g8 and now there are many ways to win, but 31 ♖c1! seems to be the simplest.

b) 26...fxe6?? 27 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 28 ♙xe6+ ♙h8 29 ♖c1! is the same old story.

27 exf7+ ♙h8!

Najdorf once again sidesteps early loss. 27...♙xf7?? 28 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 (or 28...bxa2 29 ♖a8! ♖xa8 30 ♗f3+) 29 e6+ ♙g8 30 e7 ♗e8 31 ♗f3! h6! (not 31...♗g6? 32 ♗d5+ ♙h8 33 ♗d8 ♖a8 34 ♗xa8! ♗xa8 35 e8♗ and mates) 32 ♗d5+ ♙h7 33 ♗d8 ♖a8 34 ♗xa8! (the same theme) 34...♗xa8 35 e8♗ ♗xe8 36 ♖xe8 bxa2 37 ♖a8 and White wins.

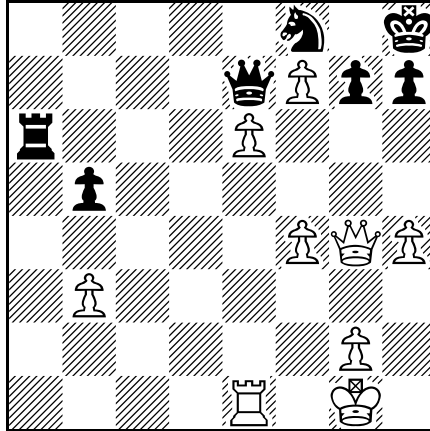
28 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 29 axb3 ♗e7 30 e6 ♖a6!

If 30...♖xb3? then 31 ♗g5! ♗b4 32 ♗e5! ♗e7 33 ♖d1, followed by ♗d4, destroys the blockade; e.g. 33...♖a3 (or 33...♗xe6 34 ♗xe6 ♗xe6 35 ♖d8! and mates) 34 ♗d6 ♖a7 35 ♗xe7 ♖xe7 36 ♖d8 etc, and 34 ♖d7! ♗xd7 35 exd7! is even stronger.

Question: Is the outlier on e6 now doomed?

Answer: No.

31 f4!



White plans a death grip with f4-f5 next.

31...h6

The e6-pawn isn't really hanging, as after 31...♖xe6? 32 ♖xe6 ♕xe6 (or if 32...♘xe6 then 33 ♕xe6! overloads Black's queen: 33...♗xe6 34 f8 ♖+ ♗g8 35 ♕xg8+ ♔xg8 36 ♘f2 and White wins the king and pawn ending easily) 33 ♕xe6 ♘xe6 34 f5 ♘g8 35 h5 g6 36 h6!! (Ivkov), Black's king and knight are trapped on the kingside, so White can march his own king across to the queenside and win with his b-pawn.

32 f5

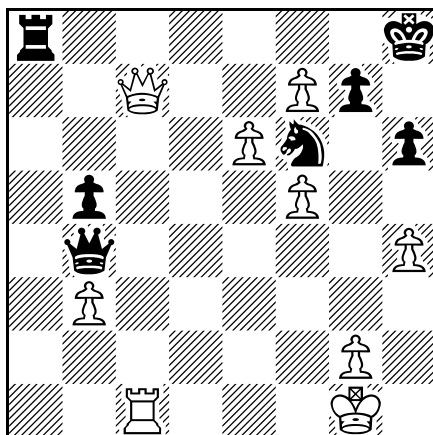
Rational thought and compassion are meaningless abstractions to a mindless, heartless mob. Now our inward arguments grow silent and all is made clear. The fruits of Korchnoi's calculation: he earned three choking pawns for the piece – way too much. Black is completely busted.

32...♘h7 33 ♖c1 ♖a8 34 ♕f4 ♘f6 35 ♕c7!

Smashing the e7-blockade.

35...♗b4

Not 35...♘d5? 36 ♕xe7 ♘xe7 37 ♖c7 ♘xf5 38 e7 ♘xe7 39 ♖xe7 and Black has no defence to the coming ♖e8.



Nevertheless, Black's defence is spent, and White's numerous winning solutions are a bit like using a thermonuclear device to heat up a frozen burrito. The e7-square is so large and so inviting, that we feel the urge to drive through it. It appears as if White has three winning moves:

- a) 36 e7, attempting to force a new queen;
- b) 36 ♖c5, attempting to smash the dark square blockade;
- c) 36 ♖c8+, a spectacular queen sac to force promotion.

Exercise (critical decision): Two of the lines work; one fails miserably. Which one would you play?

36 ♖c8??

The overeager queen, an unexpected and unwanted out-of-town relative, presents herself unbidden at Black's door. Justice delayed is justice denied. Apparently the well of Korchnoi's patience isn't as bottomless as we first imagined. I warned you: Korchnoi's games seem to contain a crazy high percentage of both double question marks and double exclaims! Occam's razor advises that the simplest path (paths in this case!) is usually the best one. Korchnoi, with his love of the dramatic and the artistic, gets seduced by the most complex and least sound of his choices.

Answer: Both lines a) and b) win easily and either forces Black's immediate resignation.

36...♔h7!

The counter-argument begins. Perhaps Korchnoi only counted on 36...♖xc8?? 37 ♖xc8+ ♔h7 ("let he who is without sin cast the first...") Black's king never gets a chance to finish his speech, since someone in the mob split his head open with a flung stone) 38 f8N+! and Black must hand back his queen, since 38...♕g8 walks into 39 ♖g6+ ♔h7 40 ♖h8 mate.

37 ♖xa8

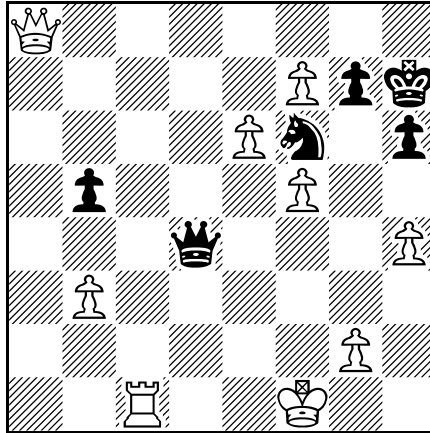
Or 37 ♖c3 ♖xh4, when 38 e7 is met by 38...♗g4! 39 e8♖ (or 39 f8N+ ♔g8!) 39...♗f2+ 40

♔h1 ♚h4+ with perpetual check.

37...♚d4+

Suddenly, White's king has no safe haven free from Black's harassing checks.

38 ♖f1



We understand Black's dire need, but which path should he take? Find the lost thread which binds Black's dream.

Exercise (critical decision): The position is drawn if you find Black's correct line. Should he play 38...♚f4+, forking king and rook, or go for a pure perpetual check with 38...♚d3+ - ?

38...♚f4+??

Oops. The wrong one.

Answer: Najdorf missed his miracle chance to swindle a draw after 38...♚d3+! 39 ♖f2 (39 ♖g1 ♚d4+ simply repeats the position) 39...♘g4+ (the point: Black's knight is allowed to participate in the attack) 40 ♔e1 (40 ♖g1?? walks into 40...♚e3+ and mate next move) 40...♚e3+ 41 ♔d1 ♚d3+ with perpetual check. Such might-have-been lines, after we botch a game, haunt us for days.

39 ♔e2 ♚e5+

39...♚xc1 is met by the old, dirty underpromotion trick: 40 f8N+! ♔g8 41 ♘g6+ ♔h7 42 ♚h8 mate.

40 ♔d1 1-0

White escapes perpetual attempts after 40...♚d4+ 41 ♔c2 ♚f2+ 42 ♔b1 ♚xf5+ 43 ♚c2 ♚f1+ 44 ♔b2. Black's queen wipes away tears, the drops to be equally distributed between herself and her king.