

# MIGUEL NAJDORF, 'EL VIEJO'

Life, Games and Stories

by

Zenón Franco



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# KEY TO SYMBOLS

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+-	White has a decisive advantage
-+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
△	with the idea of
▷	better is
≤	worse is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate



# INTRODUCTION

Writing about Miguel Najdorf is one of my greatest pleasures as a chess journalist and writer. Having known him is a privilege of which I quickly became aware, along with Sergio Giardelli, who had more dealings with him than I did. A few years ago we agreed that both of us could say “I knew Mozart”, not the real Mozart, of course, but referring to someone who reached the highest point of the discipline he embraced. Najdorf did so with the utmost passion.

I never felt able to call him “el Viejo” (literally “The old man”), as everyone, himself included, called him; I think it sounded disrespectful to me because of my Guarani roots, although obviously no disrespect was implied.

The first time I heard of him was through the magazine “Ajedrez”, and later through the occasional annotations of my mentor Bernardo Wexler, who had a high regard for Don Miguel’s chess strength.

I remember that in the 1970 Siegen Olympiad, where Najdorf played on the top board, and once again had to face the best players in the world, Wexler said, “If Najdorf wants it so, nobody can beat him, but he will want to win, and then he might lose; but if he plays for a draw, nobody can beat him”.

At that time I was unaware of the strength of the masters. The first time I went to the Club Argentino de Ajedrez (Argentine Chess Club) I watched several masters playing blitz games (or “ping-pong” games, as they used to say over there) and for me they were all very good, of similar strength. When I asked him who was the best, Wexler did not hesitate: “Najdorf, Najdorf.”

On another occasion Wexler mentioned one of Najdorf’s characteristic traits: his extreme competitiveness. He recalled that when he was eighteen he had once shared first place with Najdorf himself. Wexler was then only a second-category player and he was on cloud nine. Najdorf wanted to play a tie-break, which Wexler declined to do, explaining that he was very excited, quite un-

able to play, but Najdorf insisted over and over again, said he would give him the entire first prize if he played, etc. He insisted so much that he persuaded Wexler to play and Najdorf won the tie-break. Not until many years later did Wexler manage to get over it. If we are completely honest, this aspect of Najdorf's personality made him unpopular, but this is only one aspect of his personality.

In his book *Chess Duels* Seirawan speaks affectionately and admiringly about Garry Kasparov, explaining that there are "two Garrys, the Good and the Bad", and that "if there is one person in the whole world I would want to represent chess and to speak to a sponsor, it is the Good Garry. He is witty, charming, erudite...", while "the Bad Garry can be surly, angry and rude, making the most committed sponsor put his checkbook away and run for the nearest exit."

This description of Kasparov reminds me a little of Najdorf, not exactly, but in Don Miguel there were also two personalities. One was Najdorf the competitor; as Oscar Panno commented, "when he was competing, the others were not rivals or adversaries, they were enemies, and he treated them as such."

On the other hand, in his personality away from the board, in other words most of the time, Najdorf was pleasant, amusing, enthusiastic, interested in everything, with his strengths and weaknesses, like everyone else, but, as I was able to confirm on many occasions, basically a very good-hearted person.

Liliana Najdorf, one of his daughters and author of the book "Najdorf × Najdorf", described him like this: "to say he was larger than life strikes me as an understatement. I look for synonyms that will help me to define him and in those words I find him: passionate, disproportionate, ostentatious, gigantic, extraordinary, overwhelming, marvellous. Wise".

Just as accurate is the image that Ricardo Calvo once gave of Don Miguel in the Spanish magazine "Jaque": "Najdorf is not someone who passes unnoticed... He has a kind of strength, or energy, or vitality, call it what you will, which draws you, attracts attention, complicates or simplifies matters, (as a rule, it seems to me he complicates things), and like a whirlwind stirs up even the seemingly most structured of quiet backwaters of the spirit, of anyone who through good luck or misfortune has burst into his field of activity... He is forever faithful to his own truth: that vital enthusiasm which he appears to draw from the most primitive layers of his being, which penetrates it and which, passing through him, destabilizes anyone who accompanies him... He is neither good nor bad, that's just the way he is..."



In any case, as I write this book I am reminded of something Jorge Amado said, as reported to me by Jaime Sunye; when Amado was criticised for saying good things about a friend (whose ideas were completely opposed to his own), Amado said something like “I speak about what is good about him, let others speak about what is bad.”

Oscar Panno said that Najdorf reminded him of Don Quixote, in the part of the book where he tells Sancho Panza, “Wherever I am, that is where the head of the table is going to be.” Najdorf himself commented in a book that he had begun to write, “You can’t win unless you are a bit conceited. So the reader must forgive me if I sometimes seem to be something of an egomaniac”.

And yes he was. He could grow suddenly angry, and just as rapidly calm down. He quite often sang his own praises. He could be argumentative, an interfering busybody, etc., whatever we might choose to say, but he was also capable of apologising and he was the greatest populariser of chess in Argentina.

Not only from his column in the “Clarín” newspaper, as his friend Luis Scalise recalls. In every town he visited in inland Argentina, even the smallest, if he saw that there was no club, in his farewell speeches he never failed to make a request to the authorities: “Mr Mayor, please, how is it that a town like this does not have a chess club...?”; that was one of his ever-present requirements.

He successfully overcame the most terrible setbacks, as few are capable of doing, and as regards his meddlesome nature, on the great majority of occasions it was because he wanted to help, according to his way of seeing things, of course.

I had the great good fortune to get to know him, first through magazines and books, later by watching him play and later still by playing against him and being his frequent sparring partner in the marathon blitz sessions which were always a part of his life.

How could anyone not remember Najdorf’s sayings, repeated again and again, as entertaining as the first time he said them: “I had a ve-e-ery wise aunt, who used to say, better a pawn up than a pawn down”, laughing. “There are two ways of winning at chess, when you play well and your opponent plays badly, or when you play badly and your opponent plays worse”. “First the idea, then the move!”, etc., etc.

We shall summarise nothing less than seventy years of Don Miguel’s chess-playing life, and we shall take a brief look back at the history of chess in Argen-

tina, sometimes seen through Don Miguel's eyes, thanks to his own writings. All of this, and his games, will be discussed in the book.

Najdorf was the most important Argentinean chessplayer and he was an exceptional person; I feel privileged to have known him and to have spent time with him.

## HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

This book comes into your hands in a curious fashion, I might say "it was re-born". Initially I had conversations with a particular publishing house but in the end we did not come to an agreement.

While the talks were going on, even though there was no definite contract, I began to write it. I was very sorry when we were unable to proceed, but I did not regret the time I had devoted to it, because in the meantime I had made contact with some wonderful people, who were ready to help me with a good deal of data and previously unpublished clarifications.

After some time had gone by, I wanted to see if the work which I had begun could be put to use, and I suggested this in Argentina and Brazil, and after that to Daniël Vanheerzeele of Thinkers Publishing. All of them responded enthusiastically, which made me very happy. The first project to become reality was in Spanish, and now comes this one with Thinkers Publishing.

## STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

This book is divided into five main parts. All the games will be annotated and analysed in varying depth, mostly by me, but in some cases with notes by other masters, taken from various publications, by my collaborators in this project and by Najdorf himself.

This is how the book is divided: It begins with the unpublished book which Don Miguel Najdorf began to write, with thirteen games annotated by him.

Part 1. "Polish Stage", goes from his beginnings to the 1939 Buenos Aires Olympiad.

Part 2. "Becoming Established in Argentina", covers the rest of 1939 until 1945.

Part 3. “World Title Candidate”, covers from 1946 to 1957.

Part 4. “Among the Chess Elite”, deals with the period 1957 to 1982.

Part 5. “The Last Lap”, goes from 1983 until 1997, during which time Najdorf no longer played very much.

Although the book has a certain biographical element, it does not claim to be an in-depth biography of Najdorf. To know more about Don Miguel’s private life it would be appropriate to read “Najdorf x Najdorf”, written by his daughter Liliana Najdorf and available in Spanish and English. It is a good idea to read both versions, for they are not identical.

For the biographical information, in addition to my own memories and the material I researched, I had the help and collaboration of many people, who agreed to be a part of this book and to contribute to the memory of Miguel Najdorf.

I particularly wish to thank Liliana Najdorf, Don Miguel’s daughter, for giving me permission to use information from her books; the Polish historian and writer Tomasz Lissowski, author of two magnificent books about Najdorf and who provided me with valuable material and information about Don Miguel and his opponents during his Polish period; the Italian master Antonio Rosino, for historical data and information about Najdorf’s Italian opponents; Armando Hiebra, for the “Tiempo de Ajedrez” archives; Rafael Santana for the data about Najdorf in Venezuela; Luis Scalise, Juan Sebastián Morgado, Eduardo Bauzá Mercere, Carlos Alberto Drake, the Konex Foundation, Enrique Arguiñariz, Leonardo Szloss, Richard Foster, Agata Orzeszek Sujak, the Polish Embassy in Argentina, Fernando Lida García, Carlos Bielicki, Herman Claudius Van Riemsdyk, Christian Sánchez, and many others, who gave me their help without hesitation.

I hope that readers will experience the same pleasure that I have felt writing the book, and getting to know a little better Najdorf’s career, as well as his personality and his valuable chess legacy.

GM Zenón Franco Ocampos

Pontareas, April 2021

*Dedicated to Buenos Aires or “the capital of an empire that never existed”.*



# THE PROJECT FOR A NAJDORF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

There have been several plans for writing a book on Najdorf's life and games in Argentina, and there was even one which was started seriously, in 1988, which we reproduce here with the permission of Luis Scalise. This is what he relates in the English version of the book "Najdorf × Najdorf", Russell Enterprises Inc, 2016, by Najdorf's daughter Liliana (p. 162):

He wanted to do that famous book and he called together Luciano Cámara, Emilio Petcoff and myself. Cámara and I would do the chess part, and Petcoff the personal and biographic part. It was a very good idea. But what happened? He said "Come tomorrow to my house at 7.00 pm. We three arrived to find Rita there alone. "And el Viejo?" we asked. — "He went to the Salón Fischer to play". We called him at 7:10, 7:15, and he told us "Yes, I am leaving now". He arrived at 9:00. "OK, let's eat". By the time we ate, had some wine, it was 11:00.

"We're not going to work tonight" he said. So we just shot the breeze. Finally, once again we arranged the schedule. "Tomorrow at 7.00?"

Something similar happened on the following day, and after several months they had only been able to work on five days. The monthly salary was almost three times what Scalise was earning on the "Clarín" newspaper. They would eat dinner together, they had a good time, but it didn't seem right to him, as the book was not making any progress; Najdorf preferred to play blitz chess in the Salón Fischer rather than make the book. "Don't go there for three or four months, stay home, we'll get the book done", Scalise said to an irritated Najdorf, but this was impossible, and so the project came to an end. All that emerged was a prologue and thirteen games annotated by Najdorf, in his own style, "spiced up" as he used to say, which meant: interesting, useful, and at the same time, in some instances, with imprecise or erroneous data.

The order of the games is not chronological; I asked Scalise why not, and he said: "It was very difficult to keep to any order with Najdorf".

We shall reproduce a translation of the original 1988 text, with added diagrams and with notes at the end, where we shall gather together other versions and corrected data.

# MIGUEL NAJDORF'S UNFINISHED BOOK

## PROLOGUE

Everybody wonders, what is chess? Sport, art or science? I would say all of these things. Any human being can become a good chess player, just as he can be a good doctor, or a good painter, or a good musician.

But not every human being can be an Einstein, or a Michelangelo, or a “Bobby” Fischer. Among chess players we have a saying: “A chess player is made, a Bobby Fischer is born”.

Like every science, chess has evolved. Computers have freed the master from having to memorize and study. In my youth, memory was fundamental for a grandmaster. There were “walking encyclopaedias” such as Ståhlberg, Bole-slavsky and later Pachman and Larsen, who had astonishing memories. All you needed to do was to show them a variation and they would say: “This was played in such and such a place, in such and such a year, between Such-a-body and So-and-so”. Nowadays nobody even has to ask: they just press a button and the answer appears on the screen. As a result of this, formerly, chess used to be more artistic. The first 10 or 15 moves had to be pondered at length (we used to play at a rate of two and a half hours for the first 32 moves). And variations were created which today would take five minutes, at the most.

Beauty in chess exists in a variety of forms. Which is most beautiful? The Opening, the Middlegame or the Endgame? A grandmaster can know how to appreciate each of these phases of the game. Which style is the most beautiful? Capablanca's or Alekhine's? Karpov's or Kasparov's? It is a matter of temperament. It is very likely that when someone starts playing chess he wants to play a game full of sacrifices and combinations. But there are even several ways of doing this: there are players who prefer to sacrifice with extensive calculation and forced moves (computers can do this very quickly) and there are others

who like to sacrifice material with no clear outcome visible in the next few moves and with the results of the sacrifice only becoming apparent much later.

In this regard I have two stories concerning INTUITION in chess: in 1935 I was in a chess club in Berlin looking at a position that Sämisch had set up for us and he asked Lasker how a promising position was won. We were all focused on attacking the kingside. At this point Capablanca came in (on his way through Berlin, en route for Moscow) and he immediately demonstrated the winning move (a simple move on the queenside) and everything became clear to us. I asked him how he found it so quickly and he told me: "I just have a nose for it".

In Margate 1939<sup>1</sup> the brilliant Alekhine was playing a Queen's Gambit Accepted with Böök; he sacrificed a rook, stood up and asked me: "What do you think of it?" At that time I had serious hopes of becoming a grandmaster and to please him I replied: "Marvellous!" But I couldn't see anything. I passed a very bad night. I even went as far as thinking of giving up chess. How had he seen everything and I nothing? When we went to Buenos Aires, to the Olympiad, in the "Chantecler" cabaret on the calle Paraná, near the Politeama theatre, where the great tournament was being played, Alekhine had a wine glass in his hand (and the bottle nearby, as usual) and I said to him: "Doctor, I lied to you. When I told you I saw everything, I saw nothing. Did you see everything?" And he answered me: "As much as you did." "What?" "Nothing. But my intuition told me that something would come out of that sacrifice". So it is not just a matter of calculation, but also of judgement, intuition.

You can't win unless you are a bit conceited. So the reader must forgive me if I sometimes seem to be something of an egomaniac. Keres used to say, when asked his opinion of a chess player: "He plays better than people believe and not as well as he thinks". That's how I believe the reader should look at me.

As is natural, I began playing chess with impulsive sacrifices, always looking for the most aggressive move. And obviously I didn't achieve good results. Much later I began to improve. Many young players are impressed when they play against a grandmaster. I often got out of incredible positions by offering a draw. I never paid any attention to who was opposite me, I always looked at the thirty-two pieces. and in that manner I won, drew and lost good games. But I was always fighting, struggling. This is the foundation of everything in

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<sup>1</sup> It was in Margate 1938, Alekhine played in the main tournament and Najdorf the B tournament.



life. But among those lads in Poland, I remember some beautiful games, like the first ones we are going to look at.

My opponents were also young men, who later ended up as victims of the war, in the concentration camps...

## Game 1

▷ Najdorf  
 ▶ Maxim Frenkel  
 Warsaw 1926<sup>2</sup>

### 1.e4

At that time I nearly always opened with 1.e4. I wanted to feel the danger of playing “con mi propia cabecita” (literally “with my own little head”). In this opening the slightest slip can be enough to change the course of the game; in contrast, with 1.d4, a tempo more or a tempo less is not so serious.

My first chess book was Dufresne’s manual, from which I learned the Giuoco Piano (or Italian Opening) off by heart; I was a specialist. My opponent, a teacher of mathematics, was one of the chess elite in Poland. This was my first experience in a first-category tournament.

I should mention that before the Second World war, Poland won an Olympiad and were one of the top three. Our best players at that time were Przepiorka, Salwe, Rubinstein and Tartakower (my mentor).

1...c5 2. ♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4. ♗xd4 ♘f6 5. ♗c3 g6 6. ♕c4<sup>3</sup>

2 According to Tomasz Lissowski’s book „Young Najdorf”, Chess Player, Nottingham 2010, the results were: 1. Regedzinski 9,5/12 2. Appel 9/12 3. Rozenbaum 8/12 4.–5. Kremer y [Achilles according to T. L.] Frydman: 7,5/12 6. Mund 7/12 7. Lamdau 6,5/12 8.–9. Frenkel y Najdorf 5,5/12 10. Hirszbain 4,5 11.–12. Szpiro y Zajde 3,5 13. Szestakowski.

In „Chess Life and Review” July 1964, pages 204–205 Najdorf says that the game was played in Warsaw in 1927 against N.N.

In his „Clarín” column of 27<sup>th</sup> August 1988, Najdorf says that the game was unpublished, and that he was going to include it in the book that was in preparation, this one in fact, which remained unfinished.

3 Najdorf in „Najdorf: Life and Games” Page 60: „In those days I used to say, „I’ll lose but I’ll learn”, so I played this move hitting f7. I only later understood that ♕f1–e2, the usual move, tends to eliminate any harassment by ♗f6–g4.

Today any amateur knows that one should play 6. ♖e2, 6.f3, or 6. ♖e3. The enormous spread of chess has popularised certain lines in surprising fashion and the Dragon is one of them. From reading clippings from the Polish newspapers I knew that I was supposed to play 6. ♖e2 but the new boy wanted to know why not 6. ♖c4? I'll show you why further on...

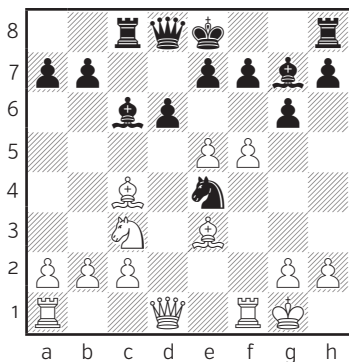
6... ♖g7 7.o-o ♘c6 8. ♖e3 ♘d7 9.f4 ♖c8?

It was necessary to play 9... ♗g4 (if the bishop were on e2 this would not be possible) and if 10. ♗xc6 bxc6 11. ♖d4 ♖xd4+ 12. ♔xd4 ♖b6, Black is fine.

10. ♗xc6 ♖xc6 11.e5! ♗e4

Black can't play 11...dxe5, because after 12.fxe5 White would capture on f7.

12.f5!<sup>4</sup>



Nowadays I would have had a long think before playing this, but at the time my hand just did it...

12... ♗xc3 13.bxc3 d5

Logical. It looks sound, because with the idea of 14. ♖b3 ♖xe5.

14.f6!

The key. Here Frenkel thought for a long time. Black is in trouble.

4 Najdorf in „Najdorf: Life and Games”, Page 60: „Incredibly strong. Frenkel thinks the following exchange will relieve his position”.

14...dxc4

If 14...exf6 then 15.exf6 ♖xf6 16.♔c5 wins, with the horrible threat of ♖e1+.

15.fxg7 ♖g8 16.♔g4

Logical and fast threatening 17.♔h6. I wasn't going to exchange the queens.

And if 16.♔d4 e6, consolidating.

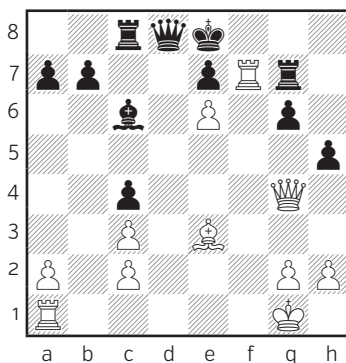
16...h5?

Black was thinking about freeing the h7-square for his rook, so that if 17.♔g3 then 17...♖xg7 18.♔h6 ♖h7. He had to play 16...♖xg7 17.♔h6 ♖g8 18.♖ad1 ♔c7, although White would be winning positionally.

17.e6! ♖xg7

Here 17...hxg4 loses to 18.exf7+ ♔d7 19.♖ad1+ winning both rooks.

18.♖xf7



18...hxg4 19.♖xg7 ♔f8 20.♖xg6

Black resigned. There is no defence against the threat of 21.♔h6+.

1-o<sup>5</sup>

5 Najdorf in „Najdorf: Life and Games” Page 60: „That’s how I played at the age of 16 — I put beauty in chess before results, I didn’t play well overall, but I produced the most brilliant games. Whereas now ... what a shame! I play to score points”.

## Game 2

▷ Najdorf

▶ Shapiro

Lodz 1929<sup>6</sup>

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♗xe4 ♘d7 5.♗f3 ♗gf6 6.♔d3 ♕e7?! 7.o-o

The simplest and most sensible move before launching an attack. Black should have done likewise, but he played mechanically to solve the development of his queen's bishop.

7...b6? 8.♗e5

Eyeing the weak square on c6<sup>8</sup>.

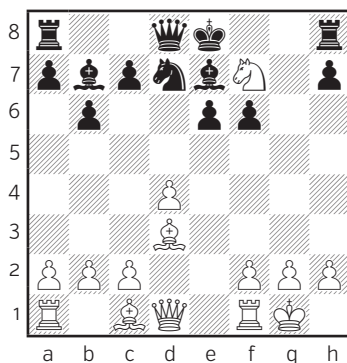
8...♕b7 9.♗xf6+! gxf6?

My opponent pondered this move for a long time. Only now did he realise that 9...♗xf6? was unplayable due to 10.♕b5+ [forcing Black to give up castling rights]. And 9...♕xf6 would be answered with 10.f4. With the move played he was thinking that after 10.♗xd7 ♖xd7 followed by ...o-o-o he would have a good attacking position based on the g-file. I thought the same and so I played the following move, which guaranteed me at least a draw.

10.♗xf7!

[continuation of the footnote from p19] In Chess Life and Review", July 1964, Pages 204–205, Najdorf indicates that the moves of the game Najdorf—N. N., Warsaw 1927 were: 1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 d6 6.h3 g6 7.♕c4 ♕g7 8.♕e3 a6 9.o-o ♕d7 10.f4 ♖c8 11.♗xc6 ♕xc6 12.e5 ♗e4 13.f5 ♗xc3 14.bxc3 d5 15.f6 dxc4 16.fxg7 ♖g8 17.♖g4 h5 18.e6 ♗xg7 19.♖xf7 hxg4 20.♖xg7 ♗f8 21.♖xg6 1-o

- 6 The sources do not agree about the year, the opponent or the place where this game was played. According to one version by Don Miguel (Chess Review, July 1964, Pages 204–205) this game was not against Szapiro but Frenke, and took place in Warsaw 1927. In „Najdorf: Life and Games”, page 60, the venue is given as Lodz 1929, and the opponent Gliksberg, stressing that the other names are wrong and that this player should not be confused with Glüksberg, Najdorfs opponent in „the Polish Immortal”. In the book that was being written in Argentina, put together by Luis Scalise with annotations by Najdorf, it says that it was played against Shapiro in Lodz 1929.
- 7 „Black adopts a positional system of defence devised by Akiba Rubinstein, one of the greatest modern masters of the chessboard. The idea here is to reinforce Black's KB3 [f6] and continue harmoniously”, Najdorf in „Chess Review” July 1964 Pages 204–205.
- 8 In „Young Najdorf” it is stated that the move played was 8.♗fg5.



Obviously I didn't see everything, but I reckoned that the black king would be forced to take an unpleasant stroll. Instinct told me that there should be a way to win.

10... ♔xf7 11. ♖h5+ ♔g8

There is nothing else; if 11... ♖f8 12. ♕h6+ ♔g8 13. ♖g4+ winning the rook.

But what now? If 12. ♕h6 then ... ♕f8, and the black king escapes<sup>9</sup>.

12. ♖g4+<sup>10</sup> ♔f7 13. ♖h5+ ♔g8

At this point I declined the offer of a draw. I had repeated moves to see if my opponent would go wrong. I also considered 12. ♕c4 but after 12... ♖f8 13. ♕h6 ♕d5 Black has no problems. I can still remember how I gave a sigh of relief on finding the move which allowed me to continue the attack and avoid calling a truce.

14. ♖e1!

Threatening 15. ♖g4+. Now 14... ♕d5 fails to 15.c4 and 14...e5 to 15. ♕c4+, leaving just:

14... ♖f8 15. ♖xe6!!<sup>11</sup> ♖xe6 16. ♕c4

9 The engines indicate that after the move rejected by Najdorf 12. ♕h6! ♕f8 „and the king escapes”, White has the strong continuation 13. ♕c4! ♖e8 14. ♖g4+ ♔f7 15. ♖fe1, and Black has no defence.

10 12. ♖e1! is the move Najdorf gives in Chess Review, without the previous checks.

11 „This was one of my best days. The tactical themes, however, are obvious.” Najdorf in „Najdorf: Life and Games” Page 61.