The
Exchange Sacrifice
according to
Tigran Petrosian

Vassilios Kotronias

Foreword by
Alex Fishbein

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Introduction

Tigran Vartanovich Petrosian (1929-1984) is the ninth world champion and a person who has left his own inimitable mark upon chess history. He is mostly known to the public for his defensive skills and his epic encounters with Botvinnik, Tal, Spassky, Fischer and Korchnoi, but in fact Tigran was much more than just that: He was an entire independent school of thought, embracing old theoretical teachings but also exploring new paths that were inconceivable for most masters of his time. He, best of all, understood the relative value of the pieces and built his whole innovative style around it. A style that paid handsome dividends and brought him to the top of the Chess Olympus.

An important element (or shall we say consequence?) of Petrosian's style was his approach to material: He greatly appreciated the mobility and long-term prospects of the pieces, refusing to adhere to strict numerical values. As a result, he was often faced with sacrificial challenges that simply would not cross the minds of others.

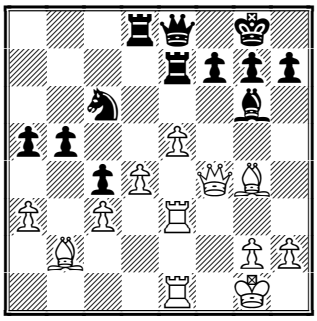
This book is dedicated to the type of sacrifice he is mostly known for to chess connoisseurs, the exchange sacrifice. A rook is a rook, a solid, stodgy piece that demands attention and respect, but Petrosian the Original Thinker was not always impressed by its force. He quickly understood that sometimes a rook's conventional value was less important than an outpost for attack or defense, an outpost from which a minor piece would radiate energy. He also knew that in order to break down fortresses or even build some, sacrifices would often be necessary, so why should this stodgy piece's life be spared if its demise served a higher cause?

Using the facts and his rare strategic feeling/vision, he gradually became one of the top exponents of the art of the exchange sacrifice, and perhaps the leading one for its positional version. But what exactly is this positional version and when is it applicable? I think you can find answers to this question from several examples presented in this book, but for now I will restrict myself to showing you Petrosian's trademark positional exchange sacrifice from the game Reshevsky-Petrosian, Zürich Candidates 1953, whose beauty is self-evident.

Reshevsky – Petrosian
Nimzo-Indian Defense E58
Zürich 1953
Petrosian, the Imaginative Champion

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e3 0-0 5.♗d3 d5 6.♘f3 c5 7.0-0 ♘c6 8.a3 ♗×c3 9.b×c3 b6 10.c×d5 e×d5 11.♗b2 c4 12.♗c2 ♗g4 13.♕e1 ♘e4 14.♘d2 ♘×d2 15.♕×d2 ♗h5 16.f3 ♗g6 17.e4 ♕d7 18.♖ae1 d×e4 19.f×e4 ♖fe8 20.♕f4 b5 21.♗d1 ♖e7 22.♗g4 ♕e8 23.e5 a5 24.♖e3 ♖d8 25.♖fe1

White seems to have won the opening battle, as the threat of e5-e6 is quite strong, but Tigran had a different opinion:



25...♖e6!!

A splendid offer, breaking the force of the attack. A clear exchange is sacrificed to stop the e-pawn's lust to advance, but this is done having in mind two important facts:

(1) To win this rook, White will have to give up his only good minor piece and all ambitions for a central breakthrough; and

(2) Black will have an unassailable post on d5 for his knight once the exchange is taken, from where it can tie down White's forces to defending c3. In addition, his bishop will have no opponent on the light squares, a fact strengthening the possibility of a total blockade.

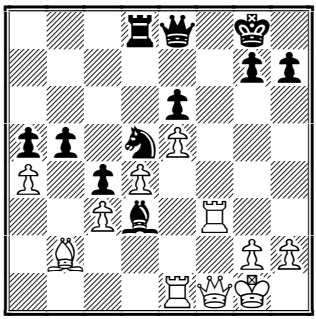
26.a4!?

Trying to undermine Black's queenside before taking the exchange. 26.h4 has been recommended by Bronstein, however after 26...♘e7 27.♖g3 ♗d3=, White cannot make any progress. The engines will all tell you that White has a substantial advantage after 26.♗×e6, but the truth is that he has nothing after either black recapture: 26...f×e6 I am almost certain that Tigran would have taken with the pawn, but the alternative is also viable.

For example, 26...♕×e6 27.♕h4 ♖b8 28.♖f3 b4 29.a×b4 a×b4 30.h3 h6 31.♖a1 ♔h7 32.♔h2 ♕d7 33.♕g4 ♕e6 34.♖f2 b×c3 35.♗×c3 ♖b3 36.♖c1 ♕d5 ⇄ and Black is not at all worse.

A likely continuation after 26...f×e6 is 27.♖g3 ♘e7 28.♖f1 ♘f5 29.♖gf3 h6 30.h3 ♔h7 31.♕d2 ♘e7 32.♔h2 ♗e4 33.♖f4 ♗d3 34.♖1f3 ♘d5 35.♖f7 ♗g6 36.♖a7 ♖a8 37.♖×a8 ♕×a8 38.♕f2 ♔g8= and Black holds firm.

26...♘e7 27.♗×e6 f×e6 28.♕f1 ♘d5 29.♖f3 ♗d3



30.♖×d3

A necessary counter-sac, or else White would be worse.

30...c×d3 31.♕×d3 b4 32.c×b4

Risky was 32.c4?! ♘b6∓ and Black has the better practical chances.

32...a×b4!?

It was also possible to play 32...♘×b4 33.♕b5 ♕×b5 34.a×b5 ♘d3 35.♖b1 ♘×b2 36.♖×b2 ♖×d4 37.b6 ♖d8=.

33.a5 ♖a8 34.♖a1 ♕c6 35.♗c1 ♕c7 36.a6 ♕b6 37.♗d2

37.♕c4 h6= is also completely equal.

37...b3 38.♕c4 h6 39.h3 b2 40.♖b1 ♔h8

40...♖×a6 41.♕c8+ ♔h7 42.♕c2+ g6 43.♕×b2 ♕×b2 44.♖×b2 g5= was also level as White's extra pawn is meaningless.

41.♗e1 ½-½

A draw was agreed at this point; Black's game was smooth after the sacrifice made and he was never in danger. The "25...♖e6!! man" was, of course, hardly going to stop here; he made many more significant and beautiful positional sacrifices in his career, unanimously praised in chess literature.

However, upon looking at all Tigran's games, I did notice that the fact that his positional exchange sacrifices were so powerful has somewhat overshadowed all his other exchange sacrifices, which are by no means less interesting or inspiring. My attempt in this work is to redress the balance and expose his universal style, through those very games where he resorted to such sacrifices.

I sincerely hope that you will find the games presented in this book not only enjoyable, but also instructive. I tried to look at them with the motivation of understanding Petrosian's way of thinking and not just focus on the moments when he sacrificed the exchange. I do also hope that some opening annotations will be appreciated, or in the worst case, forgiven. Sorry, but there are some habits that I find hard to give up.

With best wishes to all my readers for creative achievements,

Grandmaster Vassilios Kotronias
Athens, April 2022

Foreword

The best foreword to a chess book that I have ever seen was written by Mikhail Tal. It was the foreword to the 1974 Russian translation of Nimzovich's *My System*. That is where I first saw one of the most amazing moves in the history of chess, the exchange sacrifice 25...♖e6!! from Reshevsky-Petrosian Zürich 1953. You can find it on page 6 of the book you have just opened.

Tal's inimitable account of the impression that move made on him, as well as how he was lucky to survive another sacrifice, 31...♖f4! (Tal-Petrosian, Gothenburg 1955, game 9 in this book), left the words "Petrosian" and "exchange sacrifice" forever interwoven in my mind. Thus, when I was asked to write the foreword to this book, my first thought was "How has this book not been written yet?"

Well, it hadn't been. Grandmaster Vassilios Kotronias has not only filled this void in the literature, but done it with such depth and insight that you will gain a new appreciation of the ninth world champion, and of exchange sacrifices, when you read this book. Kotronias is a classical chess thinker who grew up in an age when the tradeoff between matter and energy on the chessboard inspired us the most. When is the knight stronger than the rook? You are embarking on the journey to discover this and other secrets. You can have no better guide than Vassilios Kotronias.

I first met the Greek grandmaster during a tournament in Moscow, in 1989. We were both IMs at the time. Kotronias was already known as a theoretician, and against him I decided to avoid the beaten path of my then-favorite Open Ruy Lopez. I instead played a dubious Sicilian line that I myself had thought up. Forced to think independently, Kotronias duly found the most forceful refutation and wiped me off the board. I also learned then that he had trained with the legendary grandmaster Efim Geller. I was wondering, who was training whom?! In this book, Vassilios modestly says that Efim Petrovich was his trainer, but Geller was telling me at the time how Vassilios was helping Geller in the grandmaster's favorite line against the Sicilian..

Experiences like that, among the world's royalty, cultivated in Vassilios the reverence toward the classical age of chess, which permeates this book. On these pages you will see the author lament that he hadn't met Petrosian, hadn't played

against Tal. But he is again being modest. The ten-time Greek champion has played against at least five world champions, starting with Vassily Smyslov. He is a student of the game and its history, and he brings that perspective to these pages.

In addition to talking about Petrosian and the exchange sacrifice, Kotronias brings to life the personalities of the grandmasters who played these games. He shares some interesting views on how a player's style is a function of life experience. He talks about how the search for perfection is a double-edged sword. Throughout the book, you will run across morsels of wisdom on all aspects of the game, ranging from particular structures to general advice on how to play:

- "Choosing the right way to attack requires perhaps a greater sense of danger than the one required to choose the best way of defense"

- "A major piece of knowledge I have acquired from this game is that this position should be played without the typical advance ...a7-a5"

- "The motto 'I don't believe in psychology, I only believe in good moves' applies only in the case of its inventor, Robert James Fischer"

Indeed, it is highly beneficial to have a strong grandmaster explain to you how great players think. In this book, each game will feature an introduction which will immerse you into the world where that game was played. Vassilios might describe to you the Tigran Petrosian of the time the game was played – not always the same person as during some other game or time period. He might tell you something about the specifics of his opponent's style or personality that influenced the game. At times he will correct some common historical misconceptions (e.g., game 30). And the introduction will tell you something about the sacrifice you will see in the game.

The exchange sacrifices themselves turn out to be quite diverse. To me, if someone said "the exchange sacrifice according to Tigran Petrosian," I would usually think of that ...♖e6 move, or the general concept of the exchange sacrifice for some strong knight, or control of squares of the same color. I admit I had no idea how many different types of exchange sacrifices Petrosian played. There are even famous games here, like Game 7 of the 1966 match (Game 21 in this book) and his win over Fischer (Game 31), which I didn't associate in my mind with exchange sacrifices.

You will find your share of positional exchange sacrifices here. But you will also see exchanges sacrificed in the midst of a crushing attack. You will see sacrifices born of desperation, to save a bad ending. You will see correct and incorrect sacrifices. In fact, Tigran Petrosian will lose some games here. This is real life; there are mistakes, and the author explains it all to you.

The lyrical explanations of how people think are the highlights of the book for me, but they by no means endanger the science that chess requires. You will also see a precise analysis of all the key moves and variations. Critical moments of the game are evaluated appropriately, and the computer is of course

indispensable in establishing the truth. When the computer lines become too unlikely to actually occur in a game, Kotronias notes that and explains to you how he thinks a real player would have approached the position.

We are lucky that a specific subject like "Petrosian's exchange sacrifices" gives rise to such rich and diverse material. Vassilios Kotronias has brought you the material in a way that will enhance your appreciation of chess as an art form. He has also offered you practical lessons you can use in your own chess endeavors.

Grandmaster Alex Fishbein
April 2022

Signs & Symbols

!	a strong move
!!	a brilliant or unobvious move
?	a weak move, an error
??	a grave error
!?	a move worth consideration
?!	a dubious move
□	a forced move
=	an equal position
⩲	White stands slightly better
±	White has a clear advantage
+−	White has a winning position
⩱	Black stands slightly better
∓	Black has a clear advantage
−+	Black has a winning position
∞	an unclear position
△	with the threat or idea of
⇄	with counterplay
#	mate

(9) Tal – Petrosian

Ruy Lopez [C97]
Gothenburg 1955
Riga 1958

When the Game Looks Grim, Plant a Rook on f4.

Mikhail Nekhemyevich Tal's name hardly needs any introduction from me and, sadly, as was the case with Petrosian, he is one of the most brilliant chess personalities of modern times that I never had a chance to meet or talk to. The term "modern times" may sound a bit strange as he passed away in the already distant 1992, but is something we will easily accept if we look into the core of our chess heroes: Tal's ingenuity, creativity, flashiness and style is always modern, and his flamboyant spirit never left us, in spite of his premature death.

When people see a deep sacrifice, they say, "Oh, look, he played like Tal." When they see a risky, intuitive choice on the board, they will say, "That's vintage Tal." Last but not least, Tal was an endgame virtuoso who, when the storm was calming down, knew well how to transform his advantages to victory.

It is hardly surprising he became world champion with all these qualities, the only mild surprise being that his reign was too short. On the other hand, that seemed to be the unwritten law for all those who had to face a Botvinnik in revenge mode...

Playing a gifted player like Tal must have been both a challenge and a difficult task for all his great contemporaries, undoubtedly, even more so in the period our next game was played, as he was on a phenomenal rise in the years 1957-1960, with one good result following another. Everyone knew he was fearless and original, understanding well the dynamics of chess and implementing them with the vigor of an unstoppable natural force.

He was also inventive in the opening, something which was not the forte of Tigran Petrosian, as we already know. And yet, Petrosian was one of the few players in the world who could contain Tal's immense energy throughout the years and that in a large number of encounters.

I think there were two reasons for Petrosian's success in holding back Tal, and perhaps edging him out: Petrosian, very much like Korchnoi, knew the right moment to counterattack and was also aware of the fact that showing your claws in a difficult or lost position can cause frustration to a natural born attacker. Obviously Tal was not a person to be intimidated so easily, but on the other hand, what would Petrosian have to lose? Essentially nothing, as Tal with the initiative was a synonym for victory.

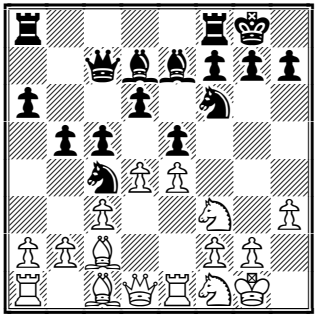
Breaking down my thoughts even further, it is not that Tal was weak when he did not have the initiative or when he had to defend, something that is revealed by the brilliant non-losing streaks he achieved near the end of his career. It is just that he did not like positions which required patience. This was perhaps a result of his long-term illness, or more likely, due to the way he looked at life.

In the encounter analyzed below, Petrosian gets a lost position early on against the Magician from Riga, but then uses both his chess prowess and the tool of psychology to come back into the game and nearly win it. The funny thing is that this is done again with an exchange sacrifice, the culmination of an improbable journey of the ♖a8 to f4(!) in a closed Spanish structure. The exchange offer, albeit correct, should not have worked, as Black's position simply did not contain enough resources, but the change in the character of the game was enough to lure Tal into mistakes.

Closing the introduction of this game, I would like to quote a great man's opinion, as it is the one fitting best to what we are going to witness. It is widely known that Petrosian's playing style was very hard to decode and varied from brilliant attacking to patient and meticulously defensive, but Boris Spassky's description of how Tigran fights back in the present game is the most concise: "Petrosian reminds me of a hedgehog. Just when you think you have caught him, he puts out his quills."

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♗e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♗b3 0-0 8.c3 d6 9.h3 ♘a5 10.♗c2 c5 11.d4 ♕c7 12.♘bd2 ♗d7 13.♘f1 ♘c4

A well-known position for the Chigorin Spanish. Tal's next move is perhaps not the most principled, but still the second most popular move in the database:



14.♘e3

I have on numerous occasions stressed my preference for avoiding piece exchanges when one controls more space, and I will repeat myself here. Perhaps White maintains still a slight edge after this move, but I have the suspicion it facilitates Black's task.

14.b3 ♘b6 15.♘e3 is more critical, and has been debated a lot at top level chess. After 15...c4 16.♗a3 ♖fe8 17.♕d2 ♗f8 18.♖ad1 c×b3 19.a×b3 a5 20.♖c1! a4 21.b×a4 ♘×a4 22.♗b4, both sides have a solid position, but White nevertheless maintains some slight pressure. The game Areshchenko-Grandelius, Grosseto Prugna 2016, continued 22...♖ac8?! (22...♘b2!± was better.) 23.♗b1 ♘b6 24.♗d3 ♕b7? 25.d×e5! d×e5 26.♗×f8 ♔×f8 27.c4! ♔g8 28.c×b5 ♘×e4 29.♗×e4 ♕×e4 30.♘c4 ♘×c4 31.♕×d7 ♕a8 32.♘g5 ♖f8 33.♕d3 e4 34.♘×e4+- and White converted his material superiority.

14...♘×e3 15.♗×e3

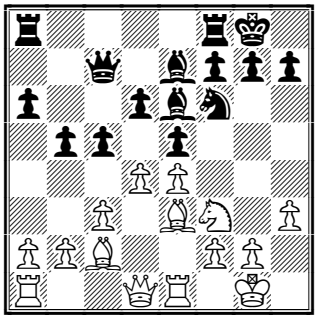
Mikhail Tal

On the bright side for White, he has clarified the position while completing development and the opposition has no chance to generate queenside play after the knight exchange. What Black needs now is to address, in accurate fashion, the issue of how to configure his pieces best, and I get the impression that Tigran's next move was not very much to the point:

15...♗e6?!

This tempts White to close the center, an event which Petrosian might have considered as suiting his aims of maneuvering slowly and perhaps achieving an exchange of dark-square bishops via b6 or g5 at a later stage. But it is rather artificial.

15...♖fe8! is better, as White will have to close the center anyway, so why give him a tempo? After 16.d5 h6! 17.♘h2 (Samko-Zakovic, Bratislava 1996), the positional idea 17...♘h7! easily equalizes, as shown by the computer variation 18.a4 ♗g5 19.♘f1 ♖eb8 20.♗×g5 ♘×g5 21.♘e3 ♕d8=. Black has the potentially superior bishop for all endgames and White is not even better on the kingside, which is the traditional area of the board where he usually develops some initiative.



16.♘d2!?

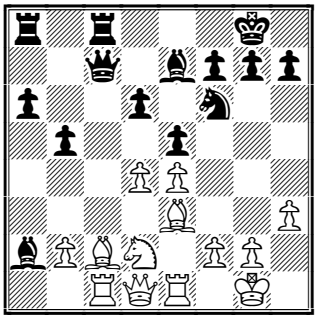
Tal liked fluid positions in general, and the text move reveals his reluctance to block the center, at least for the time being. The knight 's retreat prepares f2-f4 in order to confront Black with pressure on the kingside, and has certain value, especially from the practical point of view.

Strictly speaking though, the following natural sequence, in typically Karpovian style, looks better: 16.d5! ♗d7 17.a4 c4 18.♕e2 ♖fb8 19.♖a3! h6 20.♖ea1 ♕c8 21.♘d2 ♘h7 22.f4!±. This move comes at the right moment, giving White annoying pressure on both flanks. If Black continues with 22...e×f4 23.♗×f4 b4?, then the powerful idea 24.c×b4 ♖×b4 25.♖g3!±/+− practically wins, as the second player has created a lot of weak points that he will find impossible to defend.

16...♖fe8

16...c×d4!? 17.c×d4 ♖fc8 was possible, but hardly the way to play against Tal. White has two ways to continue, a positional and a sharp one. I am almost sure the Latvian would have gone for the latter, but the positional try is perhaps more circumspect: 18.♗b3. This is the safer continuation, fighting for the light squares.

The more intriguing try is 18.♖c1!?, temporarily sacrificing a pawn for the sake of the initiative. After 18...♗×a2! (a move few would risk playing against Tal) White has the following method to create chances for himself:



19.d5!

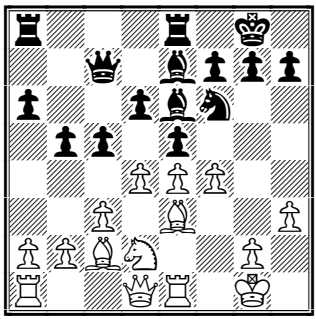
The right method to cut off the bishop's retreat. Instead, 19.b3?! cages in the bishop, but Black will be in time to extricate it. After 19...♕c3! 20.♘f3 a5 21.♖e2 a4 22.♗d2 ♕b2 23.b×a4 b×a4 24.d×e5 d×e5 25.♗×a4 ♖×c1 26.♗×c1 ♕a1= the game is drawish.

19...a5 20.♗d3 ♕b7 21.♕e2! ♗c4! This is forced, however the resulting endgame is not that bad. White obtains an edge by means of 22.♗×c4 b×c4 23.♖×c4 ♖×c4 24.♕×c4 ♖c8 25.♕a2 ♕b4! 26.♕a3 ♕×a3 27.b×a3 ♖c3 28.♖b1 ♗f8 29.♖b8 a4 30.♘b1 ♖d3 31.♖b4 ♖d1+ 32.♔h2 ♘×e4 33.♖×e4 ♖×b1 34.♖×a4 f5 35.g3± but the position remains within the drawing zone for Black.

Returning to the solid 18.♗b3, after 18...♗×b3 19.♕×b3 ♕b7 20.d5 ♗d8! 21.♕b4! ♘e8 22.a4 ♗b6 23.♗×b6 ♕×b6 24.♖ec1 ♖ab8±, Black is certainly worse but the position might be defendable. I do not know how much of this Petrosian saw, if anything at all, as his opening play in that period suggests that in general he was not keen on scrutinizing nuances in the early phase of the game. He may well have played 16...♖fe8 on general principle, which is the most likely.

17.f4!?

17.d5! ♗d7 18.f4!± was the right method to apply pressure, as the "too direct" game continuation allows Black to equalize by rather trivial means. Once again, we see here Tal's love for fluid positions prevailing over the most principled way of playing, which was none other than first closing the center.



17...♖ad8?

This gets Black into trouble. White now obtains a protected passed pawn in the center, and one that Tigran will find impossible to blockade with the ideal piece for this job, the knight.

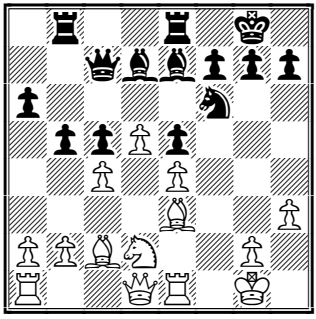
Instead, the obvious 17...c×d4 18.c×d4 e×f4 19.♗×f4 ♖ac8 20.♖c1 ♕a7 21.♘b3 h6 would have given the Armenian GM excellent chances in a rather simple position. For example, 22.♔h2 ♗c4 23.♗b1 ♗×b3 24.a×b3 ♖×c1 25.♗×c1 ♘h7 26.♗e3 (26.♕d3 ♗g5! is hardly dangerous for the defending side as 27.e5?! fails to the obvious 27...♘f8∓) 26...♗h4 27.♖e2 ♗g5 28.♗f2 h5! 29.♕d3 h4= and Black has enough activity to nullify the bishop pair.

18.f×e5 d×e5 19.d5 ♗d7 20.c4!±

An important move, stopping any thoughts of ...c5-c4. Tal must have been extremely pleased with his position around here, as White has a serious advantage, both in terms of space and quality of the pawn structure. It is obvious even to the less experienced eye that Black will have to suffer.

20...♖b8

It is already hard to offer Black concrete advice; there is simply no harmony in his camp. One certain thing is that his rooks do nothing where they stand, so Tigran starts his defensive effort by trying to bring them to less awkward positions. Conversely, White's piece configuration and overall stance creates a very pleasant impression, suggesting that to us that a decisive advantage may not be far away. At the same time, however, this is one of those situations in which club players (and even masters, believe me) do often get stuck, not seeing how to proceed, something that leads them to maneuver around aimlessly. Tal's next couple of moves are a positional lesson from which both amateurs and more accomplished players can profit:



21.a4!

By threatening to conquer the c4-square for his pieces, White forces his opponent to close the queenside, so that he can pursue his ambitions on the kingside unhindered. In addition, c5 is fixed from now on as a permanent weakness that will need constant protection from the black pieces.

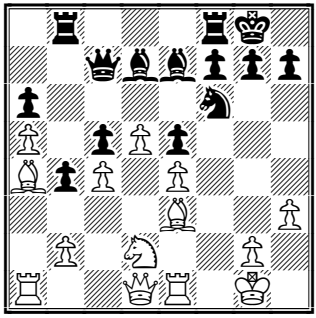
21...b4

21...♖ec8, intending perhaps ...♘f6-e8-d6, would have been instructively met by 22.♖a2!±, intending to conquer the a-file. That would have forced ...b5-b4 all the same.

22.a5!

And this is a positionally very important move, designed to exchange Black's good bishop for White's inactive one, via a4. As you can see, Tal was not just tactics or sacrifices but had also a refined strategic sense, allowing him to build those superior positions which became the starting point of many of his famous attacks.

22...♖f8 23.♗a4



23...♗×a4

It is clearly pointless to avoid the exchange of bishops with 23...♗c8, as then 24.♗c6± interferes with Black's communications to such an extent that the exchange is forced to occur, sooner or later. So Tigran deemed it right to gain at least some time by luring the white rook to a4, a square from which it would have to retreat in due course.

24.♖×a4 ♖bd8 25.♕f3

White has consolidated his positional advantage and Black's