

Misha Interviews...

Misha Savinov



Interview with Alexander Rustemov

Alexander Rustemov is an international grandmaster, certified chess trainer, former second of Alexander Morozevich, and devoted blitz player. He won the 2003 Dos Hermanas tournament, but nowadays mostly plays against computers.

Misha Savinov: Your current rating is at 2564, yet you confidently won the strong round-robin at Dos Hermanas and you're not afraid of experienced stars like Dreev or prodigies such as Radjabov and Karjakin. So where do you think you belong in the ratings hierarchy?

Alexander Rustemov:

This is an interesting question to start with! (Pause) There are such factors as class, playing level, understanding of the game, energy, and sporting form. I don't think I have problems with the first three, but the situation is much worse with the last two. For me it is easier to not lose a game than to win it, thus I produce better results in stronger tournaments.



MS: Is this because of your character or the way you were taught?

AR: Yes, both. The games of Nimzovich, Petrosian and Botvinnik had a profound influence on me when I studied chess. I am also a composed person and do not especially like risk – I prefer reliability to anything else.

MS: Did you ever wish to change your style in order to beat lower class opponents more often, even if a certain risk was involved?

AR: Changing ones style is certainly difficult, and why should I? It's better to play the chess that is natural for you, because everyone has his own vision

of the game.

MS: I have the feeling that you didn't show your full potential because your rating never reached the 2650-2670 that is required to be noticed by organizers and the general public.

AR: I have a similar feeling; however, I do not regret it at all. I always felt that only the quality of my play is important, and not my rating. Also, there are very few good tournaments, and vacant spots in them are even rarer. When I am given the opportunity to play, as in Dos Hermanas, I use it.

MS: How did you get this opportunity?

AR: I won the Internet tournament and finished second in the Dos Hermanas Open in 2002.

MS: Was it officially announced that these were requirements for the main tournament?

AR: Actually, no – I guess the organizers just liked me (smiles).

MS: Which results do you consider your main achievements to date?

AR: Winning Dos Hermanas, 2nd place in the Russian championship in 2000, winning the Euro Cup with “Norilsky Nickel,” plus I have collected quite a few victories in various open tournaments.

MS: Did you have some round-robin experience before Dos Hermanas?

AR: Yes, I did – I had two poor tournaments in Polanitsa-Zdroy and in Denmark.

MS: What kind of conclusions did you make?



AR: One has to train better and more often. To study “the equipment” (smiles).

MS: So, the problem was not psychological, it was mere training?

AR: Certainly! No amount of psychology can save you if your play is weak.

MS: So knowing this, how did you prepare for Dos Hermanas?

AR: As usual – I studied my opponent’s games. Thanks to the regulations, the pairings were made a month before the event. I also maintained my physical fitness. I played tennis, sometimes used an exercise bicycle, and in the winter I went skating.

In Dos Hermanas everything was superb. I was a little constrained at the beginning, making 5 draws in a row, and then I won 3 games. The most difficult game was played in the final round against Epishin. Somehow I saved a hopeless position, and only then did I believe my victory. It is difficult for me to judge if others were surprised by my result. Khalifman told me that I played very well and won it justly. Morozevich wasn’t too surprised either.

Murmansk: Chess Childhood

I was born in Murmansk on July 6, 1973 to a sailor’s family. My father taught me chess when I was 5. I immediately was very excited about it, but in the beginning I only played knock-out games at home with my father and elder brother (both are rated about 1700-1800). At age 8, I started to attend a chess school at the Pioneer’s Palace and soon began to win our family tournaments. Thanks to the excellent Soviet system of chess training, I was able to take part in many events around the country at that time. My first trainer was Mikhail Starkov – an excellent specialist.

MS: Denis Yevseev also started about that time, correct?

AR: We are the same age; Denis is three days older than I. He was my main opponent and won more often than I in the beginning... We progressed at a similar pace and the competition served us well. Some modern players become grandmasters at the age of 13, but that was when I became a candidate master – there were not many strong players in Murmansk, and we had to “stew in our own juice.”

MS: Yet, you finished school as the top local player, if I am not mistaken.

AR: Yes, because I started to study with the strong candidate master Leonid Igorevich Zamanskiy, and I soon made a big leap by confidently winning the city championship. Afterwards it was clear that I would have to leave Murmansk to keep progressing, so I moved to Moscow to study in the chess department of the State Institute of Physical Training.

From Valentin Arbakov to Susan Polgar

Student life in a big unfamiliar city was difficult. In order to get more money for food I started playing blitz in Sokolniki Park. As I was an 18-year-old youngster without an Elo or a reputation, the Moscow masters eagerly accepted my offers to play a couple of games. That was how I earned my living.



Soon nobody wanted to play against me for stakes; I kept coming to the park, but was idle for most of the time. One day a new opponent arrived – an unspectacular man in a worn, baggy T-shirt, who was apparently experiencing a hangover. The local hustlers introduced him as a fairly good player, and we sat at the board. To my greatest surprise, I lost 2-8 in the first 10-game match. The next day I sought revenge, but lost with a similar margin. This is how I met Valentin Arbakov (shown here), an

outstanding blitz player.

At his peak he used to beat many masters with 1 minute against 5! I have never seen such speed and technique as displayed by Arbakov. It was a big shock, and I was forever hooked on blitz.

MS: Did you ever improve your score against him?

AR: We've played hundreds of games with varying results, but it was only when I became GM in 1998 that I started to surpass him.

MS: Where did you make your international titles?

AR: In 1992, I scored +8=3 in my first international tournament and exceeded the IM norm by 2 points. Curiously, the chess federation did not send the results to FIDE, because they thought it was a sham – how could a newcomer score so many points? But even without that event I quickly became an IM.

Securing a GM norm was much more difficult because there were very few round-robin tournaments with norms, and one also had to pay the entrance fee, which was difficult for me. I played in Opens and missed norms by half a point quite a few times, but by 1996 I had met all the necessary requirements. Still, it wasn't until 1998 that I received the title because of some lazy bureaucrats in the Russian chess federation and FIDE. However, when I received the GM certificate from FIDE it was for "*Alexander Rustenov*." Nevertheless, I was extremely happy – a child's dream come true! At that moment I must have been the toughest IM in the world with a 2575 rating. Curiously, a blitz game I won against Kasparov gave me a lot of confidence and motivation, even though I won it purely by chance.

I am very grateful to Leonid Alexeevich Bondar, who lives in Chicago now, for inviting me to Minsk to study in the Belarus State Institute of Physical Training and Sport in 1994. I met my future wife there and found new friends. For instance, Yury Shulman, who also lives in the US, was a witness at my marriage ceremony. I met Susan Polgar as well, who also studied in the Institute. We played a lot of blitz in our spare time, a few hundred games, and I kept an equal score despite a big rating gap in Susan's favor (+100). She astounded me with her intelligence, her fluency in many foreign languages, and her fantastic chess skill. I am very happy that she has returned to a practical play.



Actually, one could make a decent team from the Minsk Sports Institute graduates: Boris Gelfand, Ilya Smirin, Susan Polgar, Alexey Aleksandrov, Yury Shulman and yours truly – isn't it a good team?

MS: When did you meet Morozevich and how did you become his second?

AR: I met Morozevich after I graduated from the institute in 1998. He had already won the strong Moscow championship and swept the Lloyds Masters in phenomenal style. Yet, I always sympathized with him, even when he was 14-years-old, because as opposed to Kasparov and Kramnik who had a large teams of helpers, Sasha, with his extraordinary talent, was alone. In 1998 he won a number of tournaments and I was twice honored to be his second – in Samara at the Russian Cup Final and in Pamplona. We worked mostly in Moscow, and did a lot of work on the opening, as well as training games, etc. Morozevich has his own views on chess and on life in general. It is always interesting to analyze with him and we often remained at the board until dawn...

MS: What is the most difficult aspect of being a chess professional?

AR: The most difficult thing is that we don't have any official status; a chess player is somewhere between being unemployed and a sportsman. Chess players themselves want to be considered artists and scientists, to live like Bohemians, and to earn like sportsmen (smiles). It is also quite difficult to withstand losses and bad tournaments.

MS: You don't play as often as you used to. Why is that? Do you feel a little bit rusty sometimes?

AR: Indeed, I don't play as much now because it is difficult to get decent conditions from the organizers. It is with a heavy heart that I have to miss such tournaments as the European championship – but it is unacceptable when the organizers shamelessly overcharge for a hotel room, and it is unacceptable that those who consider themselves chess professionals agree to such conditions. Of course, the lack of practice is significant, but fortunately the Internet somewhat compensates for it.

Chess on the Internet

MS: You are quite an active Internet player and even held the ICC blitz record for some time. When did you start and what do you like about it?

AR: I started to play on the Internet in 1999, I just enjoy playing. I played thousands of games on the ICC with the club's elite and won a couple of Internet tournaments. The big difference between Internet and regular blitz is the mouse. You can't compete with players like Nakamura or Schmalz in this area. Secondly, there is no psychological tension of a personal struggle because you don't see your opponent, you only see a diagram. I know many people who play much better on the Internet because of this. My rating record of 3504 was achieved in 2002 and stood for about six months. Now Nakamura's rating is something like 3670.

MS: Everyone remembers you match with Loek Van Wely...



AR: Yes, in 1999 I played a 137 game match with Loek at 3-minutes a game. I lost it $64+60=13$. We still laugh about it when we meet during tournaments – how young we were!

MS: Who are the most dangerous opponents for you?

AR: I have a bad score against Svidler and Grischuk, but am on equal terms with Aronian, Nakamura and Kamsky. Morozevich and I agreed not to play against each other.

MS: Did you play in the prestigious Moscow Open Blitz championship?

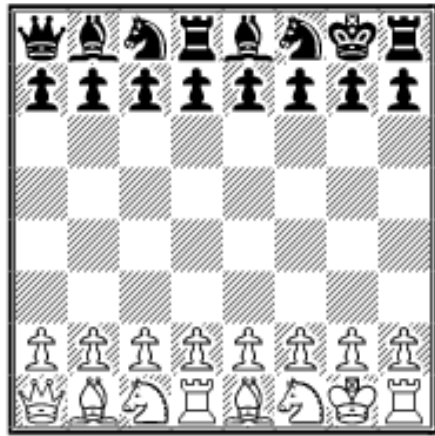
AR: No, the organizers didn't invite me, and usually I don't have the time (or motivation, sometimes) to play in qualifiers. Apart from that, I will gladly accept an offer from any strong player for a blitz match!

MS: Why do you mostly play computers on the ICC? Isn't it supposed to be harmful to one's style?

AR: Indeed, I do usually play against computers. I am secretly proud that I recently won a 3-minute match against a version of Hydra with a 5-4 score. Playing against computers is good training in modest doses, otherwise it can be harmful. The computer is very tough in open positions. It teaches you to play very precisely and it develops your reflexes, so to speak. It would take ages for people to learn how to finish off the opponent and play on the whole board as effectively as computers do. One can improve one's level by playing blitz against stronger opponents, and this is one of the reasons why I play against computers.

Alexander Rustemov Annotates

A.Rustemov – R.Kasimdzinov
Mainz Fischer-Random, 2003



1.c4

Quite logical, as in regular chess, one has to establish control over the center, plus develop the pieces harmoniously. In this position the queen in the corner is a problem, so I planned 2.b3 to bring it into play.

1...c6

An introduction to “the Slav,” but this is a dubious move, as it cuts off Black’s queen. Symmetrical play with 1...c5 2.b3 b6 would have been OK.

2.e4

No – the Panov Attack!

2...d5 3.d4!?

This is already something new; 3.ed cd 4.cd Nb6 did not promise much, so I sacrificed a pawn for development.

3...dc 4.Ne3 e5!?

Immediately counter-attacking White’s center; I planned to meet 4...Ne6 with 5.b3 cb 6.Nxb3, with good compensation for the pawn. As for 4...Nb6, Gufeld could say this move would not be to the liking of the queen on a8.

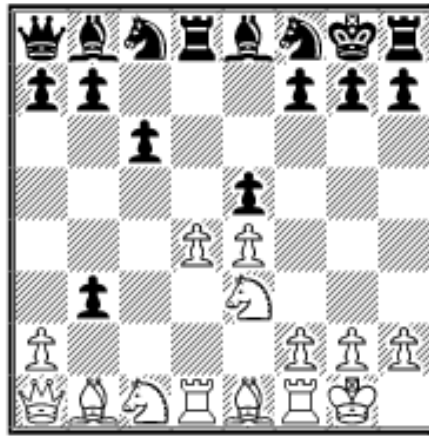
5.b3!?

Development at all costs! The move is linked with a funny trap: 5...ed 6.Rxd4 Be5? (6...Rxd4 is better.) 7.Rxd8! Bxa1 8.Nf5!, and Black can’t repel the onslaught.

5...cb

Rustam plays in a principled manner, gathering material “till better times.”

6.0-0!?



This is reminiscent of the Danish Gambit.

6...ed?!

Now White's initiative develops smoothly. Black should have seriously considered 6...Rxd4!? 7.Bc3 (7.Rxd4 ed 8.Qxd4 Ne6 is OK for Black.) 7...c5! with the idea to build a pawn fortress if White accepts the exchange sacrifice. The greedy 6...ba is dubious because of

7.Bxa2 with an attack.

7.Nxb3 Ne7

Sometimes variations are left off-stage: 7...de 8.Rxd8 e2 9.e5!! (White has only a slight advantage after 9.Rxe8 Bxh2+ 10.Kxh2 efQ 11.Bb4 Nb6 12.Bxf8 f6 13.Rxa8 Nxa8 14.Bc5) 9...efQ+ 10.Kxf1, and Black is helpless. Or 7...c5 8.Nxc5 de 9.Rxd8 e2 10.Rxe8! Bxh2+ 11.Kxh2 efQ 12.Bd3! trapping the new queen.

8.Nxd4 Be5

Defending against moves such as Ndf5.

9.Bc3

I managed to build a wonderful position for a minimal material investment. The difference in piece activity makes Black's defense extremely difficult. 9.Ndf5 would have been pointless: 9...Nxf5 10.Nxf5 Ng6 11.Bc3 f6.

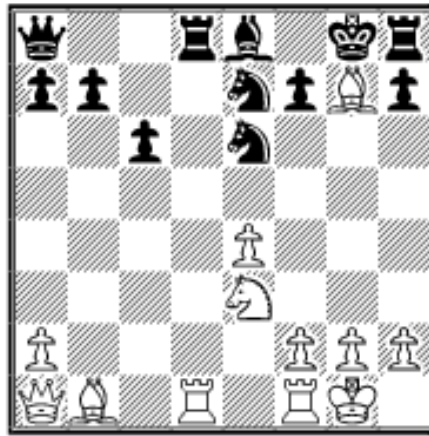
9...Bxd4?

This loses immediately; more stubborn is 9...f6, "sealing" the long diagonal – I planned 10.f4 with the initiative.

10.Bxd4 Ne6

Now it's too late for 10...f6 because of 11.Bxf6!

11.Bxg7!!



A terribly strong blow.

11...Nxg7 12.Qf6! Rxd1

Or 12...0-0 13.Qxe7 Rxd1 14.Rxd1 Qb8
15.e5 attacking h7.

13.Rxd1 Kf8 14.Nf5! Nxf5 15.ef Qb8

Defending against Rd8.

16.Qh6!

A final shot.

16...f6

There is no choice: 16...Qe5 17.f6 Rg8 18.Bxh7 wins, or 16...Kg8 17.f6
Ne6 18.Rd4 mates.

17.Qxf6+ Kg8 18.Qe7

Rustam resigned here, and suggested a nice alternative to the text move:
18.a3 h5 19.Ba2+ Kh7 20.Rd7! Bxd7 21.Qg6#!

The following game was played in the 1999 Geller Memorial, which I won.

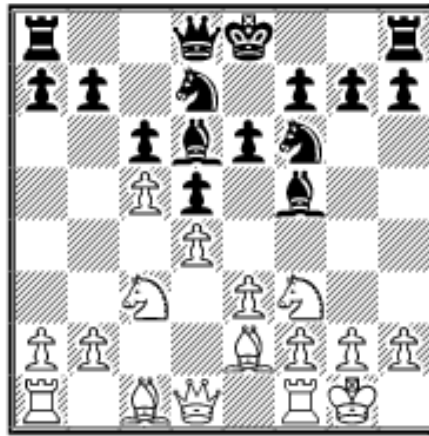
Khandhar Odeev - Alexander Rustemov

Moscow, 1999

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.e3 Bf5 5.Nc3

5.cd5 cd5 6.Qb3 Qc7 also does not promise White any opening advantage.

5...e6 6.Be2 Nbd7 7.0-0 Bd6 8.c5!?



An aggressive plan, which does credit to my opponent. It now makes me even shudder to think that in the event of the dreary 8.b3 all the subsequent brilliance would not have happened.

8...Bc7 9.b4

White's idea is very simple: b4-b5 followed by bc6, after which the c6-pawn will be rather uncomfortable to defend. Black must take urgent counter-

measures, but how? In the game Zukertort-Winawer, London 1883 the Polish maestro resolved this problem as follows: 9...a6 10.a4 Ng4!? 11.h3 h5 12.Bb2 Be4 13.b5 with very sharp play. In the romantic 19th century many masters operated in this way. But we, players of the 21st century, are burdened by knowledge, and now (alas!) there are few who play like this. Since childhood the following rule has been firmly instilled in me: to meet a flank strategy with play in the center, and it is in accordance with this rule that I played:

9...Ne4 10.Ne4?!

10.Bb2 was more prudent, of course, but my opponent wanted to mount an offensive on the queenside without losing time.

10...de 11.Nd2 Qh4 12.f4

Weaker is 12.g3 Qh3 13.b5 Nf6 14.bc6 bc6 15.Qa4 Kd7! and Black has an attack for free.

12...g5! 13.Nc4!

White is up to the occasion, as the nervous 13.g3 Qh3 is bad, and if 14.b5 Rg8 (the unpretentious 14...gf4 15.ef4 Rg8 allows White the possibility of 16.Qb3, with an unclear game) 15.bc6 gf4! 16.cd7 Ke7 with a winning attack.

13...Rg8!?

13...gf4 seemed to me to be less accurate, as after 14.ef4 Rg8 White has 15.Be3, and the position is unclear.

14.b5?!

My opponent gets caught up in the excitement of the battle, and he oversteps the bounds of acceptable risk. In the event of 14.Nd6 Bd6 15.cd6 gf4 (nothing is achieved by 15...Bh3 16.gh3 gf4 17.Kh1 f3 18.Bf3 ef3 19.Qf3)

16.Rf4 Qg5 17.g3 a6! followed by ...Nf6-d5 Black gradually consolidates, but the position remains complicated in view of the insecure position of my king.

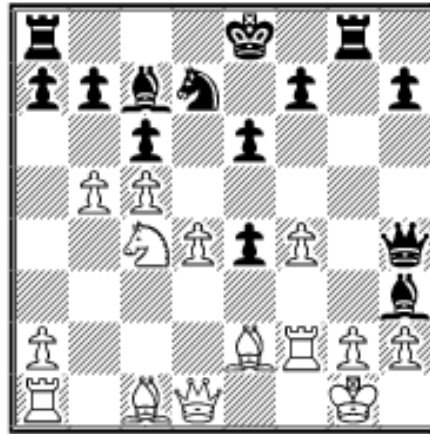
14...Bh3!

Launching an attack on the king. This move was underestimated by White, who was hoping after 14...gf4 15.Rf4!? Bf4 16.ef4 to complicate the game still further.

15.Rf2

Forced: A) 15.bc6? gf4! 16.cd7 Ke7 17.Rf2 fe3 18.Ne3 Bh2 19.Kf1 Bg3 wins. B) 15.gh3 gf4 16.Kh1 f3 17.Bf3 Qh3 18.Nd6 Bd6 19.cd6 ef3 20.Qf3 Qf3 21.Rf3 cb5 and Black is a pawn up.

15...gf4 16.ef4



16...Qf2!

This was an intuitive sacrifice. I was unable to calculate all the variations to the end, but I felt that there would be something.

17.Kf2 Rg2 18.Ke3

18.Kf1 Re2!.

18...Nf6 19.d5!

The only move, as 19...Nd5 was threatened. Everything else would have lost: A) 19.bc6 Nd5 20.Kd2 bc6! and White has no defense (21.Qa4 loses to 21...Re2!). B) 19.Qb3 Bf5!! (less clear is 19...Nd5 20.Ke4 Re2 21.Kf3 Rh2 bc6, when White has counterchances) 20.Nd6 (20.bc6? Bf4! 21.Kf4 Nd5 22.Ke5 f6 23.Kd6 Rd8 mate, or 20.d5 Nd5 with an attack. 20...Bd6 21.cd6 Nd5 22.Kd2 Bg4 with a winning position, since the white king is badly placed. C) 19.Bd2 Nd5! (after 19...Bg4 20.Bg4 Ng4 21.Ke4 Nf2 22.Kf3 Nd1 23.Kg2 cb5 24.Na3 Nb2 25.Rb1 White stands slightly better) 20.Ke4 Rf2!! and in order to save his king, White has to give up a lot of material.

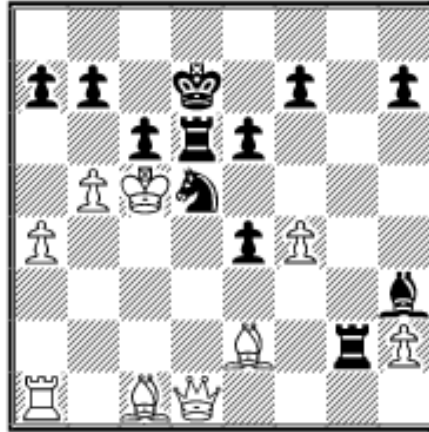
19...Nd5 20.Kd4 Rd8

Another way of continuing the attack also came into consideration – 20...0-0-0.

21.Nd6 Bd6 22.cd6 Rd6

Insufficient is 22...c5 23.Kc4! Rd6 24.Kb3!, and White avoids the immediate danger.

23.Kc5! Kd7 24.a4!



White has safely found a series of the only correct moves, and he chooses the strongest continuation here as well. Bad is 24.bc6? Rc6 25.Kb5 (25.Kd4 Nc3) 25...Re2! I calculated roughly as far as this position when I sacrificed my queen, but after 24.a4! I discovered to my surprise that there was no forced win. I did not want to regain the queen: 24...b6

25.Kc4 Nf4 26.Bf4! (26.Qf1 Rg4! 27.Qe1 (27.Qf2 e3!) 27...Ne2 28.Qe2 e5!, including the bishop in the attack, or

24...Rg8!?

26.bc6? Kc6 with advantage to Black.) 26...Rd1 27.Rd1 Kc8 28.Bh5 Bg4 29.Bg4 Rg4 when a draw looks imminent. Therefore I continued the attack:

25.b6?

24...Rh2!?, but after 25.Ra3 the position is not entirely clear.

Avoiding the opening of the c-file. After the game my opponent suggested 25.bc6 Rc6 26.Kd4. In a joint analysis we established that 26...Nc3 27.Qe1 Rg1! 28.Qc3 Rc3 29.Kc3 leads to a draw. Can Black achieve anything more? Interesting is 26...Kc8! or 26...Rd8! with the idea of 27.Bb5 Kc7!.

25...ab6 26.Kc4 Rg2!

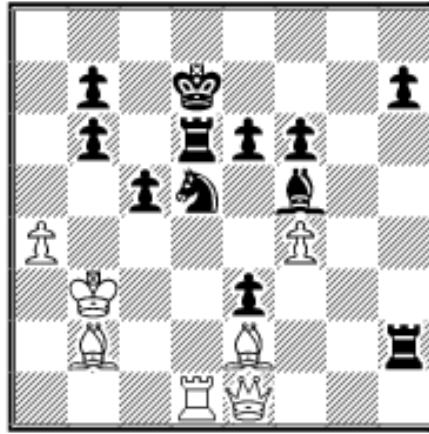
Here, too, it is unfavorable to win back the queen: 26...Nf4? 27.Bf4! Rd1 28.Rd1, or 26...b5 27.Kb3 Nf4 28.Bf4 ba4 29.Ra4 Rd1 30.Bd1 – in both cases White has drawing chances.

27.Qe1 Bf5!?

Black calmly continues to strengthen his position. He controls the entire board, and it is important not to allow White to coordinate his pieces. 27...Rh2 is for inveterate materialists.

28.Ba3 c5 29.Kb3 Rh2

Not 29...Nf4 because of 30.Bb5 Kc7 31.Ra2!.

30.Rd1 e3 31.Bb2 f6!

Here I began to feel satisfied: indeed, largely thanks to his pawns, Black dominates the position, and the opponent is essentially powerless to undertake anything.

32.Bb5

32.Ka3 Kc7! etc.

32...Kc7 33.Qg3?!

33.Rc1 would have enabled White to prolong the resistance. The active move in the game merely hastens the end. In my opponent's defense, I should say that by this point he was already in time trouble.

33...e2! 34.Qg7 Kb8 35.Re1

Or 35.Qf8 Ka7 36.Be2 (36.Rd5 e1Q, 36.Rc1 Rh3 37.Ka2 Nb4 38.Ka1 Rd2 – threatening 39...Ra3! - 39.Bc4 Rc2) 36...Re2 37.Qd6 Bc2 and wins.

35...Rh3 36.Ka2 Nb4 37.Ka1 Rd1 38.Bc1 and White resigned as 38...Rb3 leads to mate in five moves.



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