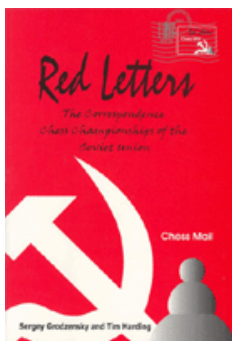




COLUMNISTS

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Tim Harding



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Erik Larsson: A Lifetime in the Service of Correspondence Chess

For the second month in succession, it is my duty to pay tribute to a major figure from the twentieth century world of chess who has died. Perhaps the name of Erik Larsson may not be familiar to the majority of readers outside correspondence chess and his native Sweden, but he was the man principally responsible for the revival of postal chess after World War Two and for turning it into a globally-organised sport.

Erik Jakob Larsson was born on 20th May, 1915, and died on 14th February 2009. His funeral took place on 6th March. He was small of stature but a big man in chess.



Erik at Copenhagen airport in 1998. Picture: Tim Harding.

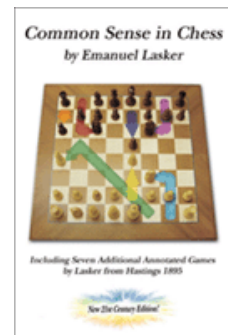
Erik Larsson was an active CC organiser since the 1930s and was ICCF Tournament Director until he retired in 1987, having previously held the same role in ICCF's immediate precursor, ICCA (International Correspondence Chess Association), of which he was a co-founder. He held the title of International Arbiter and his ICCF Rating was as high as 2335 even when he was in his eighties.

He was the first Honorary Member of ICCF (1957) and the first recipient (1998) of ICCF's Lifetime Achievement Award. Erik Larsson was also an Honorary Member of the Swedish Chess Federation.

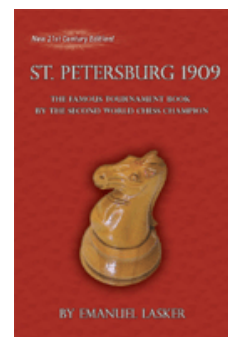
Between 1939 and 1945 Erik Larsson organised postal chess in Sweden, beginning the popular team tournament in that country. As soon as peace came, he got in touch with enthusiasts in England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and elsewhere, trying to organise tournaments and a new body to re-establish what the Internationaler Fernschachbund (IFSB) had been doing before the war, but with a more global scope. He began his (stencil-duplicated) *Monthly Resume* of the International Correspondence Chess Association in January 1946. It was in English with some paragraphs in Esperanto.

The first issue announced the Preliminary Committee of the ICCA with President, Baruch H. Wood; Secretary, J. Zaagman (Amsterdam);

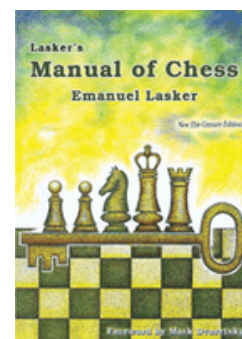
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Treasurer, R. Evans Thomas (Chester, England) and Tournament Director, Erik Larsson. Countries could join ICCA for £1 per year. It announced the first Olympic Tournament in which each member could enter up to four teams of six boards. Some famous names were mentioned among those already entered, with H. Mostert (later ICCF President) on board four for Holland II. Groups began as they could be filled.

The Editorial of the February issue stated that thanks to the development of air traffic: "...the time seems not so far away when a card or a letter can reach every part of the earth within 48 hours as a maximum..." Yet Erik lived long enough to use his fax machine regularly for rapid international contacts. He saw the webserver correspondence chess era begin, although in his last tournament (the Mostert Memorial Open, which began in 2006), he played as always in a postal section.

The next part of this article is based on a taped interview that I made with Erik just over ten years ago. I met him in September 2008 at Copenhagen airport on a stopover before flying to the ICCF Congress in Riga. He had travelled down from Landskrona for the day to meet first Jorgen Axel Nielsen (who was on an earlier flight) and then myself. Parts of this interview appeared in my magazine *Chess Mail* (first issue of 1999). My words are in italics.

EL: I am very glad to meet my friend Tim "live."

TH: How did you first get involved in chess?

EL: It was my father, who was a railway inspector, and his comrades had a club and he learned to play chess there. He taught me some chess, but his rules were not the same as ours, exactly. He moved two pawns in the beginning at once. Still the other moves were quite all right. But he had another funny custom. He did not like that I took his pieces. Even if he could take my pieces back. He was so very angry. So we played with all the pieces all the time. But I think that was good; I mean, there are players today who do not like to exchange the queens.

TH: And in CC?

EL: My career in correspondence chess started in 1932 when I got a glimpse of a chess magazine. My father then was the chief of the post office in a little village in South Sweden so I could ask him to subscribe for me the magazine *Schackvärlden* (Chess World). They had a CC tournament for all the Nordic States and that interested me at once. So my first tournament was in 1932 and there were players from Norway, Finland and Sweden. So that was a very good thing for me, because I was interested from the first to get contact with players outside Sweden. That was the beginning.

TH: You were a teenager then?

I was 17 years old and I was not a very good player. I had no talent for chess. I was much better to play football and tennis and table tennis and so on. My ball sense was much better than my chess sense. But when I could play by correspondence, and had more time and I could look in the theory and such things, then I could play much better. That was the reason I was a lover of chess by correspondence.

In the magazine, I could see that there were other organisations who arranged CC tournaments. There was the *British Chess Magazine* and of course the IFSB and I entered those tournaments as soon as I could. That was in the Handicap of the *British Chess Magazine* and I still have many prizes from those CC tournaments. [In those days the British Correspondence Chess Association did not have its own regular magazine and *British Chess Magazine* used to publish at least two pages each month about CC.]

I had a dream that I could have a full chess set of prizes with chess pieces from the prizes but I think I have only have four, but then I was an organiser myself and I could not play so much in the *BCM*. I liked it, and I think they did not play so well in the *BCM*. The British players were much easier to beat than the Norwegian, or the Finnish and Swedish ones!

TH: The Congress of IFSB was held in Sweden in 1937?

Yes, I started [as IFSB Tournament Director] in 1937. I was popular with Hans-Werner [von Massow] because there was a report which we had to read in French, and I could read it in French, and I remember Dr. Mario Napolitano. He put his eyes on me; he was very glad that I could speak French too.

TH: It is interesting that you have people communicating in languages that are not their main language and you still get this now at ICCF Congresses.

When Manfred Mädler came to the 1996 Congress at the end, he said to me: "I think English is going to be the language of CC from now on. I suppose he meant with the Internet.

Manfred Mädler? I buy books from him. He knows a little Swedish. He says I was the man who taught him to drink schnapps!

TH: We spoke before the tape started about the difficulties of running an ICCF Congress.

It's a difficulty with different languages when you have a Congress. When I was very young, I was a great enthusiast for Esperanto. Today there are many people who would like to introduce Latin as an international language; I do not like it, as it was my very first worst subject in school! I remember very much my good friend Zagorovsky, from Voronezh; he said once to me "I like to hear you, I do understand you very well, but when Von Massow talks his German I have so many difficulties to understand him." I think it would be better if you spoke Esperanto or something like that, very simple.

I think in my magazines from 1945 and so on (the *Monthly Resume* and *Mail Chess*) I had a very simple English. I couldn't have so many words that the other people did not understand... I think that people from other countries who didn't have English as their mother tongue, they liked my simple basic English.

TH: At the time you were producing the "Monthly Resume" and "Mail Chess," were you living in England, where it was printed, then?

No, I was living in south Sweden, and Stockholm. I worked thirty years in Stockholm. I lost my south Swedish dialect in Stockholm so they didn't like me when I came back to south Sweden! They thought I was too sophisticated.



*Erik on his 90th birthday in 2005
Picture: Carl-Eric Erlandsson*

{Erik now spoke a little about organising IFSB tournaments in the 1930s.}

One of the big difficulties when you are responsible for correspondence chess tournaments is when a player withdraws too early; what to do about the other games? Now we have a good ruling for these matters, but there is still the matter of getting Elo and IM norms and so forth.

I knew one case of my own. It was Paul Keres, and I had a great difficulty because it was just when he stopped playing postal chess and was a very big OTB player. He played IFSB and he resigned all his games in that tournament, although still one or two were in his own favour. I had difficulties what to do about it. I gave him all noughts and it was confirmed later that this was correct.

I think our ruling today is better. I have always tried to decide by my heart and not the texts, but it is difficult.

TH: You mentioned the time limit that we have now in ICCF, with thirty days for each ten moves. Did this come in before World War II?

After the First World War. I was a member of the British Correspondence Chess Association and I played in the Handicap tournament. The time limit then was, I think, forty-eight hours a move so it was not flexible. You had to reply before the third day or something like that.

So that was a big change that we had from the Germans in the IFSB that we had thirty days flexible for ten moves. That was a very important thing for correspondence chess because it couldn't be very quality play with a forced limit.

TH: It's not just the speed; you can accumulate time like in OTB chess?

Yes, [in the old rules] you could have some cessation of play, but only temporarily.

I think time is not so important for CC. It's a matter to try to play the very best move and if you need some more days... It's also important that you can exceed the time limit. I know how many over-the-board players have been very angry about this!

The rules for correspondence chess would not be necessary if we had what we call now the *Amici Sumus* spirit. We need not have any rules...

The problem is the people who enter tournaments and then after a few months you don't hear from them anymore, or they play very slowly. And to kick them out of the tournament takes so much longer when they can exceed the time limit twice. I think it has been a problem for a long time that our Tournament Directors have been a little too amicable people. They could be a little stronger and the first exceeding of the time limit is a punishment they could use more readily. (TH: That rule has since been changed for most competitions.)

TH: What about the numerical notation used in ICCF events?

I think the numerical notation, which I introduced just after the Second World War, in my *Monthly Resume*, was a very good thing.

TH: You found this written someplace in the 1880s?

Yes, it was not my invention, but I used it. I have found this notation system with 11 for a1 and 21 for b1 etc., in a *British Chess Magazine* from 1889 or something like that. [TH: Roald Berthelsen pointed out that the Dane Th. Jensen suggested the numeric notation (as it is used today) in an article he wrote in January 1873 in the *Nordic Chess Magazine* "Nordisk Skaktidende." The article to which Erik was referring was

actually in the *** 18** issue of *BCM*, but it had been suggested in the 1850s in an English chess column and according to the *Oxford Companion to Chess* it was first thought of and published even earlier than that.]

RH: So when they were playing the IFSB tournaments and so on in the 1930s, were they using the German algebraic notation? Or was everybody using their own language and the opponent had to figure out what the move was?

Yes, but before the two World Wars, I think the algebraic notation with “a1-b1” for example, was what we used, so it was first after 1945 the numeric notation was the official one in correspondence chess.

TH: Please tell readers about some of your co-workers in CC organisation.

I will speak about those people who have helped me so much to develop correspondence chess. First of all is Hans-Werner von Massow; he was only 17 years old when he started. He often told me that he would have [preferred] another development of CC in the very beginning. But he was too young then so that he could not interfere so much as he wanted to.

Another man who I liked very much, and who helped me very much, was Cecil Purdy. After the Second World War I wrote to everybody I could, proposing the formation of a new international CC union... I got replies from almost everyone around the world, including Cecil Purdy... My correspondence with Cecil thus started very early, and our writing was extensive and regular. IFSB consisted mainly of Central European countries. Many countries and other continents had been missing. The ICCA immediately became (surprisingly to me and to all others) a worldwide union.

I emphasised the importance of sound playing rules, for international competitions, in achieving fairness to players of all backgrounds, as well as a high standard of play. However, though the IFSB rules were based on a decade of experience, many countries did not know or wish to adopt them, while others also used different notations.

I discussed all these important matters with Cecil, and we were 100% in accord. As Cecil had great authority in the English speaking countries, he became a most valuable support to me, and we were able to proceed quicker than I had expected. In one of his letters Cecil wrote to me: “I see in CC, as in chess generally, a by no means negligible factor in promoting international fellowship, a necessary ingredient in any recipe for world peace. But CC is the most important in this respect, because it gives the direct contact between many players of different countries.”

Purdy was helping me especially when I had some fight with Mr. B.H. Wood when I started the *Mail Chess*. Wood said that it was not possible for us to print and publish *Mail Chess* because our economy was not good enough. Then Cecil Purdy helped me very much and I could go along. It was perhaps a little out of what I should have done, but I think the future told that my way to work then was correct.

(Erik was very reluctant to discuss the breach with Wood and the replacement of ICCA by the ICCF. He said he intended to write an article for “Chess Mail” about what happened in the early 1950s, but he never did. In the book that I am writing on the history of correspondence chess for McFarland, there will be a lot more about this critical period. I still have a letter Erik sent me, dated 20 April 1997, in which he wrote:)

Thank you for sending me copies of B.H. Wood’s announcement that he plus Zaagman and ter Braak [were] taking over ICCA. As a matter of fact nobody accepted, but all players including Purdy stood on my side. If I had fully “resigned”, the ICCA had probably died. Maybe B.H.W.’s idea

was that his *Chess* could take over, which his writing in June 1950 seems to show.



*Erik at his summer house in Kvarlöv
Picture: Carl-Eric Erlandsson*

(Now back to the interview from 1998.)

TH: The "Monthly Resume" led to Mail Chess but financial difficulties arose in late 1949 and there was a crisis in 1950. The World Championship was going on and Wood at first tried to say in his magazine that it was not legitimate and then that you had resigned. Because the players recognised that it was legitimate and that you were running it, that was the true situation.

The players come first. So a new organisation had to be established...

H. ter Braak then, he was not a very strong man, he could not bring it forward. So I had to organise it. I think I did correctly. I think it was the right decision, no question about it. Maybe it was against the Board and against the rules but... It appears to me that it was a legitimate championship.

And B.H. Wood was sick then. He tried to say he gave money, but he didn't.

TH: I was surprised that Wood was involved in ICCA; he had played in the British CC Championship, but I don't think he played internationally.

TH: But you say Sir Robert Robinson [1947 Nobel Prizewinner for Chemistry] declined to be President?

Yes, that was my idea. It would have been better because B.H. Wood had his own tournaments and he also perhaps liked ICCF to be a commission of FIDE. [A.F.] Stammwitz [first ICCF General Secretary] also would have liked ICCF to be in FIDE.

TH: He was an important person in British over-the-board chess when I was starting to play in the 1960s.

He was a nice chap, that Stammwitz. It was unfortunate because B.H. Wood did a lot for British chess in other ways, although he was primarily a businessman. Later I played in Nottingham and B.H. Wood was there. He went with me in the car to a pub and we drank a beer. He had no real interest in correspondence chess.

TH: After the split with Wood, who was involved?

There was [J.L.] Ormond [Switzerland, 1st President of ICCF in 1951] and then there was [Anders] Elgesem. He was very little known in

Norway but he was a very good man. He was in Moscow and I think we owe it to him that the Soviet Union became a member of ICCF. He said in Moscow there was only vodka, vodka, vodka... But I think they liked him in Moscow.

TH: In the 1950s, of course, Von Massow became important again. In 1951, the year that ICCF was founded, Hans-Werner von Massow resumed publication of Fernschach.

The IFSB and Hans-Werner von Massow were very big people and a very big organisation before the war, but after the war I think so many things changed. I knew Hans-Werner very well and I think he was the most friendly man, but one thing he could never forget was that his beloved Dresden was so damaged in the last months of the Second World War.

I have seen things that he has written, people don't know it, he has written in English. But after the war he did not like to write things in English. One time he had to go in railway carriage with some Americans with a not very nice dialect and he said he could not stay, he had to go out. I understand he was a very nice man and he did not like to hate anyone.

He was a very good friend of Israel and the Jewish people. He had organisers in the Nazi time: Edwin Weiss for one, who was Jewish. But he could not write anything about him. He could not thank him but he still had him in the organisation, with all the risks...

That is a very, very bad thing, this politics. I remember I had a letter from him and he ended it "Heil Hitler!" but I knew it could not be from his heart. But he had to do so, because if he had not written "Heil Hitler" I would not have got the letter.

TH: There was a censorship of the post?

Of course, censorship.

TH: When you say Von Massow would have liked to do things differently, you mean in the 1920s?

He was too young then but after the war... He was very good friend. It was he and I together who started to have our proverb *Amici Sumus*; and we worked together [a total of] 111 years. We wanted that correspondence chess should be a link between people from all over the world. It's a very good thing, correspondence chess.

Hans-Werner was not a bad player himself but afterwards he did not like to play at all.

TH: Some players get so busy with organising that they don't have the time...

No, it's about...He didn't like to show that he might lose a game, that's the difference between him and me! I can lose a game... It's not the whole world if you lose a game.

J.D. ("Pat") Thorn - Erik Larsson

ICCF World Championship 18 semi-final-6, 1989

Sveshnikov Sicilian [B33]

(Notes by Erik Larsson)

A game on the theme, the strong h-pawn.

**1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 e5 6 Ndb5 d6 7 Bg5 a6
8 Na3 b5 9 Bxf6 gxf6 10 Nd5 Bg7**

The old move was 10...f5.

11 Bd3 Ne7

To eliminate the strong d5-N.

12 Nxe7 Qxe7 13 c3 h5!?N



Black starts a minority attack to gain space for his bishop-pair. 13...f5 is the Novosibirsk Variation.

14 Nc2 Bh6 15 0-0?!

Welcoming for Black.

15...Bg4 16 Be2 Bf4 17 Bxg4 Bxh2+!?



With this move, Black gives up both bishops, but opens the h-file with tempo for attack.

(TH: this sacrifice could hardly work in today's computer era but Black stands worse anyway after 17...hxg4. Almost throughout the game, Larsson is losing against his strong English opponent but he does not give up trying.)

18 Kxh2 hxg4+ 19 Kg1 f5

This advance has been pending for the past ten moves.

20 Qd5 Rd8 21 Rfd1 f4 22 Ne1 Kf8 23 Kf1

23 Qc6!?.

23...Rh2 24 Ke2 Kg7

Both kings are fleeing, in opposite directions.

25 Rd2 f3+ 26 gxf3 g3!?

26...Qh4?!.

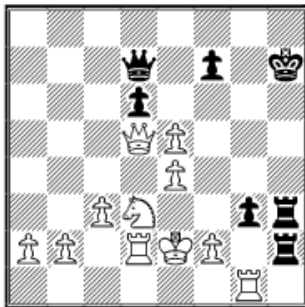
27 Nd3 Rdh8!?

27...Qa7?!.

28 Rg1 R8h3 29 Qa8

White's appetite for pawns saved Black.

29...Qc7 30 Qxa6 Kh7 31 Qxb5 Qa7 32 Qd5 Qe7 33 f4 Qa7 34 fxe5 Qd7



35 exd6?! Qg4+ 1/2-1/2

Drawn, in view of 35...Qg4+ 36 Kf1 g2+ 37 Ke1 Rh1 38 Qxf7+ Kh8 39 Qf8+. A unique end position. Black's (new?) idea to attack with the h-pawn came off well.

(TH: White's 35th move virtually ruined his game, yet the final position is indeed fascinating. Neither player seems to have seriously considered the possibility 36 Ke1!? gxf2+ 37 Rxf2 Qxg1+ 38 Ke2 when White may retain chances of winning even if he loses a rook; e.g., 38...Qg4+ 39 Kd2 Rxd3+ 40 Kxd3 Rxf2 41 d7, after which Black exchanges his rook for one of the white queens, but is still in danger.)

Erik Larsson - E. Fedorov (USSR)

ICCF World Championship 18 semi-final-6, 1989

Closed Sicilian [B24]

(Notes by Erik Larsson)

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 Rb8!?

Surprising. I found after a long hunt in my library that Ljubojevic played it v. Spassky in Bugojno in 1978. Can it really be good tactics to show so early your plans to attack on the queenside?

4 f4 g6 5 Nf3 Bg7 6 Bg2 b5 7 a3 Qa5 8 0-0 b4 9 Ne2 c4



10 Kh1!

Spassky played 10 d4? cxd3 11 cxd3 Qb6+ 12 Kh1 bxa3 13 Rxa3 Bxb2 14 Bxb2 Qxb2 15 Qa1 Nf6 16 Ned4 Nxd4 17 Nxd4 a6.

10...Nf6 11 d4!

"When you are strong in the centre, attack on the wings." Here I was weak on the wing so I advanced in the centre with a pawn sacrifice.



11...Nxe4 12 Ne5 Nxe5 13 fxe5 Bb7

Black is still allergic against playing in the centre, for instance 13...d5.

14 Be3 c3?! 15 axb4 Qxb4 16 b3

I have tackled Black's persistent exercises on my queenside and survived well with big hopes on my two open rook files.

16...Qb6

Why not try 16...Nd2!?.

17 Qd3 d5 18 Nxc3 Nxc3 19 Qxc3 Rc8 20 Qd2! 0-0 21 Ra4 Rc7 22 Rb4

Suddenly it is I who is dominating on the queenside.

22...Qa5 23 c3!

Prelude to a little deceptive trap. Contrary to my expectations, Black very kindly fell into it.

(TH: A typical pre-computer, postal-era devious move. White could just play 23 c4 or next move there is a more direct possibility in 24 Bf4, but the trap turns out to be the quickest way to win!)

23...Rfc8 24 Qb2!? Rxc3?? 25 Rxb7 Rxe3 26 Qf2 1-0

Too many threats: Qxe3, Qxf7+, Rxe7 etc.

Erik Larsson - Günter Schmandt

ICCF WT/M/594, 1992

Sicilian Grand Prix [B23]

(Notes by Erik Larsson)

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 f4 e6 4 Nf3 d5 5 Bb5 Nge7 6 Qe2! d4 7 Nd1 a6 8 Bxc6+ Nxc6 9 d3 Be7 10 0-0 0-0?! 11 a4! h6 12 Bd2 Bd7 13 Nf2 Qc7 14 e5 b5 15 axb5 axb5



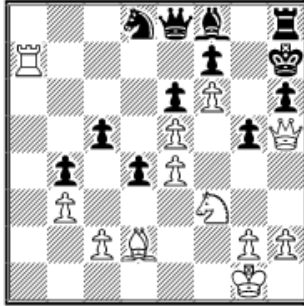
16 Ne4

16 Qe4?!

16...b4 17 Rfc1 Rxa1 18 Rxa1 Nd8 19 Qe1! Bc6 20 b3 Kh7 21 Qg3 Rg8 22 Qh3 Bxe4 23 dxe4 Qc6?

23...Qb7!.

24 f5! g5 25 Ra7! Qe8 26 f6 Bf8 27 Qh5! Rh8



28 Nxc5+! 1-0

If 28...Kg8 29 Nxf7! Nxf7 30 Qg6+ Bg7 31 Qxg7 mate.

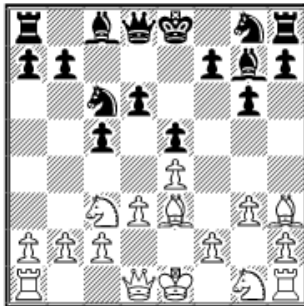
Erik Larsson - Uwe Klasen (GER)

ICCF WT/M/700, 1995-96

Closed Sicilian [B26]

(Notes by Erik Larsson)

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 g3 g6 4 Bg2 Bg7 5 d3 d6 6 Be3 e5 7 Bh3?!



Does theory know it? Usual is 7 Qd2 and Nh3 sooner or later.

7...Nge7 8 Bxc8 Rxc8 9 Nge2 f5 10 0-0 0-0 11 f3 fxe4

11...Qd7.

12 dxe4 Nd4 13 Kg2 d5

13...Rf7.

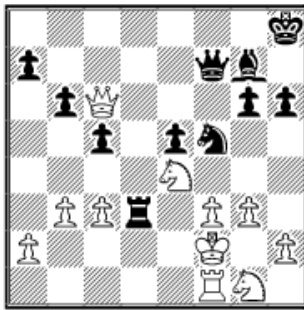
14 Bg5 dxe4 15 Nxe4 h6 16 Bxe7 Qxe7 17 c3 Nf5 18 Qd5+ Kh8

18...Kh7.

19 Kf2 b6 20 Rad1 Rcd8 21 Qc6

21 Qc4.

21...Qf7 22 Rxd8 Rxd8 23 b3 Rd3 24 Ng1



24...Qd7?

Black considered that this move contributed to his loss of the game. His advantage on the d-file diminished and he got a bad pawn structure.

25 Qxd7 Rxd7 26 Ke2 Kg8 27 Rd1 Rxd1 28 Kxd1 Kf7 29 Ke2 Ke6

29...h5.

30 Nh3 Kd5 31 Kd3 g5? 32 Nhf2 a6

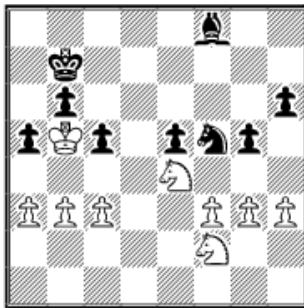
32...Bf8.

33 Ng4 Ke6 34 a3 a5?

All Black's pawns are on dark squares like his weak bishop.

35 Kc4 Kd7 36 Kb5! Kc7 37 h3 Kb7 38 Ngf2 Bf8

Too late.



39 Nd3 Nd6+ 40 Nxd6+ Bxd6 41 g4! Bc7 42 Nb2 Bb8 43 Nc4 Bc7 44 a4 1-0

Black resigns: 44...Bd8 (44...Ka7 45 Kc6) 44 a4 Bd8 45 Nd6+ (45 Nxe5 Bf6) 45...Kc7 46 Nf7 (or 46 Nf5) 46...Bf6 47 Nxh6 e4 48 fxe4 Bxc3 49 Nf5 Be5 50 Ne3.

Postscript 1: The Wade Library

I am reliably informed that the late Bob Wade's library has indeed been bequeathed to the English Chess Federation and will become part of the English Chess Library at the Hastings campus of the University of Brighton. I gather that the boxes of chess literature have already arrived in Hastings, but as yet I do not know how long it will be before they are catalogued and made available to readers.

Postscript 2: The World Championship

Topalov's victory over Kamsky last month in the world championship semi-final match raises the attractive prospect of an exciting Anand-Topalov title match later this year. No "toiletgate" this time, I hope!

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