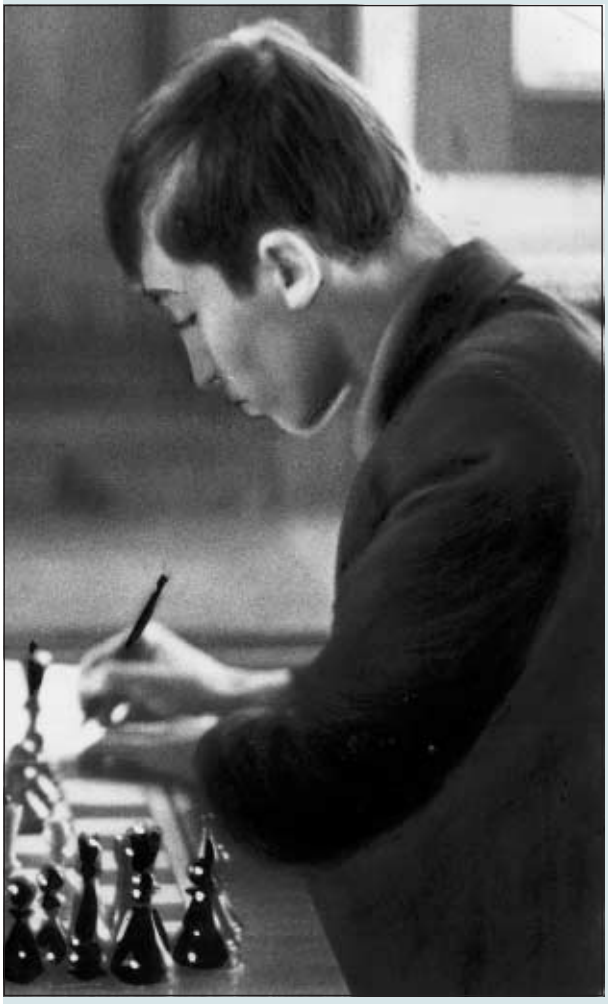
THE RELIABLE PAST

GENNA SOSONKO

The early 1970's saw the emergence of a whole constellation of promising young chess players. It was a most extraordinary generation that included Anatoly Karpov, Jan Timman, Ljubomir Ljubojevic, Ulf Andersson, Henrique Mecking, Zoltan Ribli, Gyula Sax, Andras Adorjan and Eugene Torre. And Armenia's favourite son Rafael Vaganian, who followed in the footsteps of his legendary compatriot Tigran Petrosian.

In the summer of 1969 a tournament was held in Leningrad to select the Soviet representative for the World Junior Championship. The best young players were invited to take part: Tolya Karpov, Rafik Vaganian, Sasha Beliavsky and Misha Steinberg, the exceptionally gifted boy from Kharkov who sadly died at an early age. Beliavsky declined the invitation, and it was decided that the remaining three would play six games each. The tournament turned out to be a long drawn out business, and Rafik asked me to give him some help.



'How should I counter the Nimzo-Indian?' he asked as we began our preparations for one of the games against Karpov. From childhood this had been the future world champion's favourite response to 1.d4. 'Go g3 on your fourth move', I suggested – even then I was inclined towards fianchettoing the King's Bishop – 'it's not a bad move, and there's practically no theory here.' We looked at the various possibilities. 'How about if on 4...c5, instead of knight f3, I play 5.d5?', young Rafik suggested. I backed this idea – 'Why not, it's an unconventional move – you can be creative in your play.' His choice was made.

The venue for that strange match-tournament was the chess club of the Palace of Pioneers, which used to be Tsar Alexander III's study, when it was still the Anichkov Palace. The games were played at a table beside an enormous window looking out over Nevsky Prospect. The children were all away on holiday, there were no spectators unless the player who was free that round wandered over to look. When I arrived the game had only just begun. After 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.g3 c5 5.d5 ♘e4 6.♕c2?, Karpov went 6...♕f6 and Rafik looked at me more in sorrow than in anger: White was on the verge of defeat, although in the end Vaganian managed to pull off a draw.

The tournament was won by Karpov, who went on to take the World Junior Championship and so launch his brilliant career. But his opponent's rise was also impressive. After winning in a strong field at an international tournament in Yugoslavia, Vaganian became a grandmaster at twenty, a rare achievement at that time.

Rafael Vaganian playing Anatoly Karpov in the Leningrad match-tournament held in the Palace of Pioneers in 1969, for the purpose of determining who would represent the Soviet Union in the forthcoming World Junior Championship.

By that time the young grandmaster's opening repertoire was already in place. The pirouetting movements of the knight, the most curious piece on the board, which takes us back to the game's Eastern origins, seem to me to offer the most favourable conditions for unexpected combinations, the greatest scope for the imagination. Vaganian is particularly fond of this piece and has played his knights marvellously since he was a child. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that when he plays White, he often uses the Réti opening, and when Black, he has often opted for the Alekhine Defence – both openings that bring the knight into play on the very first move.

JORIS VAN VELZEN

'The crown prince of Armenian chess'

But his chief defence against White's advance of the king's pawn has always been, and remains, the French. This comes of course from Petrosian and is characteristic of the whole Armenian school of chess: Lputian, Akopian and many others have all used the French Defence as their main weapon against the move 1.e4. This Eastern interlacing, these intricate patterns of pawns, especially in systems with a closed centre, evoke the architecture of the monasteries and churches hewn out of the Armenian mountains.

At the age of twenty Vaganian cut a striking figure. A visiting general at an army chess contest was once rendered speechless by the sight of Private Vaganian in foreign shoes and a purple jacket, his curly hair in a huge mop à la Angela Davis. Formally Rafik was doing his military service like anyone else, but I doubt if anyone ever saw him in fatigues.

For the next twenty years Vaganian's life was dominated by chess. He played constantly: team contests and Spartakiads, World Student Championships, Olympiads, European Championships and of course the Championships of the USSR. He was victor in more than thirty international tournaments. In 1985 he won the Interzonal Tournament at Biel, leading the runner-up, Seirawan, by one and a half points. Immediately afterwards he shared first place at the Candidates' tournament at Montpellier. He played Candidates' matches for the world title. He belonged to the world chess elite. And it was not just a question of prizes and victories: his style of play was itself memorable, and many felt that his results, however impressive, did not reflect his enormous potential.

Colleagues of Vaganian who have played dozens of games with him – Boris Gulko, Vladimir Tukmakov, Yury Razuvaev, Lev Alburt – all describe him as an exceptional talent. Everything in chess came naturally to him and his technique was of the highest quality. If you replay his endgames, comparisons with Capablanca inevitably spring to mind. His play was notable for its harmony, his tactics in perfect tune with the development of the game as a whole. The chessboard awoke the composer in him, and what he created was somehow complete, like a study, so astonishing at times was his conception.

Artur Yusupov recalls how during one team competition he assessed the situation in an adjourned game with Vaganian as equal, and proposed a draw. Vaganian refused. Artur was surprised, went over the

possibilities again in his head, then discussed the situation with his grandmaster teammates. They too were baffled: a draw seemed inevitable. And then suddenly, just before the game was resumed, it hit him – Vaganian's sealed move, subtle and cunning, demanded a defence of extreme precision and care.

Vaganian's playing was unrestrained, and on occasion he left himself overexposed and lost the game as a result. But he played himself and allowed others to play. He didn't care what other people thought, he didn't try to read their glance for an assessment of the position on the board, he saw and felt it as only he could. His health was excellent, he possessed all the qualities that define a great chess player: imagination, a very subtle understanding of position, brilliant technique. Nevertheless he never played a match for the world title, and indeed never even got very close.

Why?, we may ask. If we don't look for an explanation in Plato's postulate that nothing in the world is worth any great effort, or subject to painstaking research Smyslov's proposition that the constellation of the stars did not favour Vaganian and it was simply not his destiny, then we need to look for the answer elsewhere.

His contemporary Anatoly Karpov, who has played numerous games against him, suggests that Vaganian's career has been dogged by the fact that his play depends very much on his mood. In the right mood he can play; in the wrong mood, his game becomes flat. It is also true that Vaganian has sometimes lost games because he was unable to rein in the multitude of ideas in his head. Sometimes he became so distracted that he forgot one harsh truth: in chess, as in football, it's not the elegant feints and dribbling that count, it's the goals scored. Most of Vaganian's colleagues would concur that if he had spent a little more time on his chess, kept strictly to a training regime, even if it was just an hour a day, and if he had had a permanent trainer to work with him on his openings, like Karpov had Furman, and if he had had better luck... Well, you can't argue with that.

The more farsighted suggest that Rafik, who in his youth was completely uncontrollable and led a totally reckless existence, needed not so much a trainer, as a person who would have just been with him all the time, like Bondarevsky with Spassky. If the Vaganian of today, with his accumulated wisdom and life experience, had been with his 25 year old self, perhaps his outstanding natural gift would have had a chance to develop fully. And you have to agree with that as well.

But I think there is another, more important, reason. Vaganian lacked the obsessive desire to become not just one of the best, but the very best, to subordinate everything in life, if only for a time, to those little wooden figures, to try to take the final step, make the last ounce of effort. But that last ounce of effort would have meant giving up the life he had grown accustomed to living, a life that flowed like a wide river, not bounded by chess, tournaments and travel but filled with friends, long sessions at the dinner table often lasting far into the night, dates and parties, cards and dominoes, jokes and tricks, and everything else that goes into the unstoppable merry-go-round of existence. He was too fond of all the joys of life, or what is usually meant by that phrase, to trade them all in for immortality in the form of his photograph hung up for posterity amongst the Apostles on the chess club wall.

Once in the 1st League of the USSR Championship, he was doomed to a long, passive defence while playing out an arduous endgame. After one of his moves he got up and went over to master Vladimir Doroshkevich. 'Dora', he said, 'go and buy some wine and sandwiches, and don't forget a pack of cards: we'll go into the night'. He was resigned to the fact that his evening was totally lost, but the night still belonged to him.

He had inexhaustible reserves of strength and the carefree self-confidence of youth. And it seemed that it would go on forever. And he got away with it all – the sleepless nights, the constant partying; everything went his way, without any pondering over the meaning of life or self-analysis or self-programming, because youth itself is programmed for success. The proverb, 'If Youth only knew, if Age only could', has always seemed to me nonsense. If Youth knew, it wouldn't be Youth, encumbered as it would be by reason, logic and common sense.

In his youth Vaganian played a great deal. In 1970 alone he played more than 120 games – a record for the time. Botvinnik, on hearing this, shook his head: the patriarch recommended playing 60 games a year, and spending the rest of the time on preparation and analysis. In those days tournaments lasted two or three weeks, sometimes a month, and Vaganian would be away for home for long periods, but wherever he was he always knew that home meant Yerevan.

He grew up in the East, and family and friends meant and still mean more, immeasurably more, to him than in the West, where families communicate through occasional telephone calls and postcards and

meet up only for Christmas and birthdays. During the World Cup in Brussels in 1988 his younger brother, his only brother, died. When the organizers tactfully raised the question of whether he would continue to play his answer was firm and immediate. As I took him to the airport, he was inconsolable, and I realized then what his family and his home meant to him, what place they occupied in his scale of values.

From his first childhood successes, Vaganian's name was known to everyone in Armenia, a small country with so many tragic and often bloody pages in its history. In any country fame brings with it not only benefits, but also a certain responsibility. In Armenia the role of national hero, the focus of the pride and love of a whole nation, is doubly gratifying but also doubly onerous. In the mid 50's, when Soviet chess players started travelling abroad more often, they would often be met at their destination not only by the tournament organizers but by a group of people chanting just one word: Petrosian. This was the Armenian diaspora, scattered around the world, welcoming their pride and joy, their favourite. When Petrosian played the World Title match against Botvinnik, Armenians sprinkled the steps of the Estrada Theatre, where the competition was taking place, with earth brought from their holiest place, the Monastery of Etchmiadzin. And the day that he won the title became a national holiday in Armenia.

If Petrosian was the King of Armenia, Vaganian became its Crown Prince. It was all there: the rapturous welcome after each victory, the press and television interviews, the recognition on the street, the autograph signing, the congratulations of friends he had grown up with, the receptions and celebrations with the city and republican fathers, the protracted dinners where the tables groaned with food and the famous Armenian brandy flowed like water. Grandmasters who travelled to Armenia at the time recall how if you happened to mention in conversation that you were a colleague or friend of Vaganian, you became an honoured guest and there was no question of your paying your bill in a restaurant or café. Not surprisingly, there was little time left for serious work on his chess.

Botvinnik once remarked that Vaganian played as though chess did not exist before he came along. There is a note of disapproval here at his reluctance to work, to study the heritage of the past, but also amazement at the spontaneous and dispassionate workings of his mind. This quality might explain the wit and originality that mark Vaganian's pronouncements on one or other aspect of the game. Once when comparing chess masters from two different schools of thought, he said that the difference between Réti and Nimzowitsch was that Réti was essentially an attacking player, whereas Nimzowitsch was a defender, and based his entire strategy on defence.

At tournaments he could often be seen with Lev Polugaevsky. In spite of the considerable difference in their ages, they were somehow drawn to one another, and made a colourful pair. Polugaevsky was the gloomy and anxious Pierrot to the exuberant joker Vaganian's Harlequin.

'Of course he didn't hear you', Vaganian reassured Polugaevsky at an overseas tournament after the latter had made a critical remark about the leader of their delegation, only to find him standing in the corridor outside the room where the remark had been made. 'When he gets back to Moscow he'll send a report about me to you-know-who, and they'll never let me out of the country again!' sighed the desperate Polugaevsky. 'I tell you what, we need to carry out an experiment. I'll go out into the corridor, and you say something in a loud voice. I need to know for sure whether he heard me or not.' 'Polugaevsky is a moron!' shouted Vaganian in a voice that brought down the plaster from the ceiling. ' You know, I couldn't hear a thing, what a relief', blushed Lev as he entered the room, trying to avert his eyes...

Vaganian has lived most of his life in the Soviet Union. He had of course to take into account the norms and rules of that country, but his attitude to them was rather like that of Tal's: he acknowledged the rules of the game, but it all happened somewhere in the background, and had nothing to do with him. He simply regarded it as a given, and remained himself in any situation. Like many people at that time, his only daily contact with the country he lived in was reading the newspaper 'Sovietsky Sport'.

During the Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1978, surreptitiously reading a book by Solzhenitsyn, he confined his comments, as he turned a page, to the laconic 'Yes, it's a bit of a mess.' He had a very sane attitude to life and an acute perception of the motives, actions and aims of people in the Soviet State. Nothing ever surprised him, although of course neither he nor anyone else at the time could foresee that in thirteen years time this unshakeable State would simply cease to exist, that he would be living in a small town

Mikhail Tal, Tigran Petrosian and Rafael Vaganian at the Keres Memorial in 1979.

in Germany, that Misha Tal would be his neighbour and that little Armenia, after gaining her independence, would find herself mired in a whole heap of serious problems which have yet to find their solutions.

He is still living in Germany, near Cologne, with his wife and two children. This is his tenth season of playing for the Porz Club in the Bundesliga. That is his main, in fact his only regular competition. There are also games in the Dutch Team Championship, and the odd appearance elsewhere. He can't remember when he last played in a closed tournament. Like most grandmasters of the older generation he uses a computer only as a database. He doesn't study the game any more, apart from keeping an eye on developments at current tournaments. He has nothing more to learn. 'The chess that we played just doesn't exist any more', he said to Boris Gulko at the end of the USA-Armenia match at the 1994 Olympiad. Just as in his youth, he doesn't win games in the opening. And playing White doesn't often guarantee him an advantage. Nevertheless his results are steady: each season he scores about 80 per cent in his games for Porz, and the club's success is to a great extent down to him. And sometimes he still plays games of incredible style and skill. But not always. Not always. Only when he's in the mood and feels like playing. He still plays for Armenia in Olympiads, and enjoys spending time there: so many things connect him to Yerevan. His children speak Armenian, Russian and German, but Rafik himself prefers to stick to his two first languages – he never got his tongue round German, and makes no effort to learn it. His son plays chess, but not competitively. Vaganian and his wife (who is also a chess player, but has not played seriously for years) are not interested in encouraging or pushing the boy. 'These days it's no profession. In most cases it's just hard work, badly paid, and to spend your whole life doing it....', says Vaganian, and you can hear in his voice echoes of Lessing meeting a professional French horn player and wondering 'how can you spend your whole life biting a bit of wood with holes in it?'

Vaganian knows only too well that even in the old days fifty was the critical age for chess players, and that this is even more true today, in this age of total intensification of the game. He has long since begun the descent from his peak, but this brings its own pleasures. There's no hurry any more. You can stay in your comfortable hollow and watch the youngsters clawing their way to the top. When he talks about them, there is no note of envy in his voice: he has known the sweet taste of fame and has no delusions about it. He is relaxed talking about it, it doesn't bother him, perhaps because it's much more difficult to make way for a new generation when you are in your thirties than when

you will soon be entering your sixth decade. The danger lying in wait for many people as they get older – the trap of taking on some kind of socially responsible role – is not one that threatens Vaganian.

He has a characteristic way of speaking with a rising intonation at the end of each phrase, as though he is annoyed with someone or is complaining about something. His voice is instantly recognizable. 'That's Vaganian', Timman once said to me as we approached the room set aside for competitors at some tournament, and heard someone's laughter issuing from it. I also hear his voice as I recall fragments from the conversations we had about chess and about life.

'No, I never had one particular chess idol. Though I did have a model – Fischer. I knew all his games, I was in love with his playing. Like him I tried never to offer a draw, I always played to the bitter end. And Bronstein! What a player! And Kortchnoi at the height of his powers! And Geller! And Tal, of course, Misha and I were very close – he was just a genius. Look at the way he played. He maybe knew a couple of types of positions better than his opponent, but he improvised as he played. It was a different game then. We knew a bit, we studied a bit, and then we improvised at the chessboard. Nowadays they play move by move, everything's checked by the computer, the game is often decided after thirty moves. And then there is the terror of the ratings, that they make such a fetish of. I know it sounds like nostalgia and carping, but the chess we played in the seventies and eighties suited me better, those USSR Championships where we were creating the game right in front of the audience. Western players made no bones of the fact that they learned their chess by studying the games at those tournaments.'

'I always dreamed of becoming the champion of the USSR, but the only time I managed to win was in Odessa in 1989, when it wasn't the same Championship any more. I wanted to win a classic tournament where all the big names were playing: Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Kortchnoi...'

'I would describe my style as universal, except my defence wasn't very strong; I always tried to counterattack, like Kortchnoi – I wasn't so good at an orderly, patient defence. That was something Petrosian was good at – he was a great player.'

'I probably played best in 1985, when I won four tournaments in a row, and an Interzonal with a considerable lead, and shared top place in the Candidates' tournament. Of course there were failures as well. Why? I lost my taste for the game, I suppose, I didn't have that obsession with winning: after all, I'm no Kortchnoi or Beliavsky. Apart from that – lack of motivation, lack of persistence, and then there were my friends, you know what I mean, everything was fun, we all had lots of fun...With Tolya everything was set up thoroughly, whereas I only had a trainer for a week, a month, when there was a tournament. Though I often beat Karpov between 1969 and 1971.'

'What do you lose as you get older? A bit of everything: motivation, memory, desire, energy. But that's not the whole story. The main thing is you start thinking that chess isn't everything in life. And then there are losses, the losses in your life that leave deep scars on your soul...'

Almost forty years ago a small boy won his game in a clock simul against Max Euwe. Over the decades since then he has played against every champion and every great player of the last century.

The life of any great chess player is indivisible from the games that he played, from his best games. But Vaganian's best games are also indivisible from the time when they were played, and the place where they were played. Like the 1975 Soviet Championship, when he checkmated Beliavsky's king on the stage of the packed two thousand-seater Armenian Philharmonic Hall, to thunderous applause and cheering.

The unreliable past – it seems that some Eastern languages have a tense with that name, and it seems a good way to describe that time in relation to chess today. But that time did exist, and so did that amazing chess world, and those wonderful players, and he, Rafael Vaganian, was also part of that world.

In the autumn of 2000 I was talking to Viktor Kortchnoi in Istanbul. 'Vaganian? He has something that makes the pieces move around the board in a way only he can conceive of. His game is something special – and I've seen plenty in my time. More than once I've seen him play in time pressure, although he had grasped the position instantly. And it happened because he didn't want to just play – he had to play his own way. Perhaps that's why he never got close to playing for the world title. He was never a chess practitioner, he was a chess artist, a fantastic chess artist!'

This year the fantastic chess artist Rafael Artyomovich Vaganian celebrates his fiftieth birthday.

To mark this occasion Rafael Vaganian annotated one of the most inspired games from his career for New In Chess, his splendid victory over Samuel Reshevsky at the international tournament in Skopje in 1976.

NOTES BY

Rafael Vaganian

FR 16.5
Samuel Reshevsky
Rafael Vaganian
Skopje 1976 (5)

The game against Reshevsky started at 10 a.m. lest my opponent would have to play after the first star had reached the firmament. At the time it was not so easy for me to start that early. Now I am used to being awake at 7 a.m., when my wife prepares the children for going to school...

1.e4

Reshevsky always played 1.d4, unless he was absolutely sure of what his opponent would reply to his moving the king's pawn. In those days, of course, I would play the French Defence without exception.

1...e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 ♘f6

Reshevsky was probably expecting 3...c5, which I had played against Karpov in Round 1. However, I wanted something else.

4.e5 ♘fd7 5.f4 c5 6.c3 ♘c6 7.♘df3 ♕a5

Another option is 7...c4, which Petrosian played a few times.

8.♔f2 ♗e7 9.♗d3?!

9.g3, in order to bring the king into safety, was preferable. I was thinking about 9...b5 to create queenside counter-play as quickly as possible after 10.♔g2 b4.

9...♕b6 10.♘e2 f6

I had had this position before. The game Adorjan-Vaganian, Student Olympiad, Teesside 1974, went 11.♔g3 g5 12.♖e1 cd4 13.♘ed4 gf4 14.♗f4 fe5 15.♘e5 ♘de5 16.♖e5 ♘e5 17.♗e5 ♖g8 18.♔h3 ♖g5 19.♗b5 ♔d8 20.♕e2 ♗d7 21.♗d3 ♔c8 22.♘f3 ♖g8 23.c4 ♔d8 24.♗h7 ♖f8 25.♕d2 ♖c8 26.b3 ♖c5 27.♖d1 ♔c8 28.♗d3 dc4 29.♗c4 ♕c6 30.♗e2 ♖e5 31.♘e5 ♖h8 32.♔g3 ♗h4 33.♔f4 ♖f8 0-1. This victory helped me to score 10 out of 11 on Board 1.

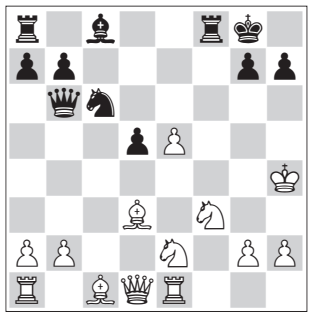
11.ef6 ♗f6 12.♔g3 cd4 13.cd4 0-0 14.♖e1?

This is evidently a mistake. 14.h3 was the right way to proceed, removing the king from the danger zone.

I had been looking at this position for quite some time, contemplating various moves, when lighting suddenly struck me from above: the f2 square, the f2 square! I started to calculate the consequences of 14...e5. It was imperative to see everything right up to move 20.

14...e5!! 15.fe5 ♘de5 16.de5 ♗h4 17.♔h4

17.♘h4 ♕f2 mate!



17...♖f3!!

It would be wrong to play 17...♕f2? 18.♘g3 ♕g2 19.♗f1!, when it is White who wins!

18.♖f1!

The only move. 18.gf3 ♕f2 mates in two moves (19.♔g5 h6 20.♔f4 g5 or 19.♘g3 ♕h2 20.♔g5 ♕h6). On 18.g3, 18...♕d8 19.♗g5 ♕d7 is decisive.

18...♕b4 19.♗f4 ♕e7 20.♗g5 ♕e6

This is the crucial move I had to foresee when embarking on the combination.

21.♗f5

The lines 21.h3 ♖h3 22.gh3 ♕h3 and 21.♕a4 ♖h3 are simple.

21...♖f5

Of course, Black must avoid 21...♕f5? 22.♕d5 ♗e6 23.♕f3.

22.♘f4

Now 22.♖f5 ♕f5 23.♕d5 ♗e6 24.♕f3 ♕e5 25.♗f4 g5 wins for Black.

22...♕e5

The rest is clear. Black is a pawn up and has a crushing attack against the enemy king to boot.

23.♕g4 ♖f7 24.♕h5 ♘e7 25.g4 ♘g6 26.♔g3 ♗d7 27.♖ae1 ♕d6 28.♗h6 ♖af8

And here Reshevsky overstepped the time limit. He was so upset that he didn't shake hands, but later, at the prize ceremony, he walked up to me and congratulated me on a brilliant win. ■