

The notes to this game, by Douglas Griffin, are based on those of Levenfish in the newspaper *64* (1937) and in *Izbranniye Partii i Vospominaniya* (Fizkultura i Sport, Moscow 1967). Additional variations are given by A. Khalifman in *Mikhail Botvinnik – Games; Vol. I, 1924–48* (St Petersburg, 2000). At key points in the game Khalifman attributes a number of variations to N. Riumin; the original source of these is not stated. Additional background is provided by A. Soltis in Chapter 6 of *Mikhail Botvinnik - The Life and Games of a World Chess Champion* (MacFarland, 2014).

Levenfish had shared 1st-2nd places with I. Rabinovich in the 9th USSR-ch (Leningrad, 1934/35). In the spring of 1937, he had taken clear 1st place in the 10th USSR Championship at Tbilisi, thereby consolidating his position as one of the leading chessplayers in the Soviet Union. Botvinnik, who by 1937 was regarded as one of the leading players in the world - thanks to his shared first places in the 2nd Moscow International (1935), his 1st place at the Nottingham International (1936) and his 2nd place, behind Capablanca, at the 3rd Moscow International (1936) - had not participated in either event.

During the summer of 1937 the Soviet chess authorities announced that a match would take place between Botvinnik and Levenfish for the title of USSR Champion. Levenfish's memoirs make it clear that the request for the match had come from Botvinnik. Since Levenfish would have otherwise had little to gain - he already held the title - the organisers added a provision that he would become a Soviet Grandmaster if he won or drew the match. The match was scheduled to end when either player scored 6 victories, or when the score reached 5 wins to 5, in which case it would be declared drawn. The first 8 games of the match took place in Moscow, after which the play switched to Leningrad. In the 12th match game Botvinnik scored his 5th victory, with Levenfish having scored 4; the next victory by either player would therefore either decide the match in favour of Botvinnik or bring it to a drawn conclusion.

Levenfish – Botvinnik

13th game, Match for the Title of USSR Champion, Leningrad 1937

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6

In the first 5 match-games in which he had the black pieces, Botvinnik had preferred the Nimzo-Indian/Queen's Indian defences, but in the 11th match-game he switched to the Gruenfeld. He eventually lost that encounter, but he obtained an excellent position from the opening, so here he repeats this choice.

3.Nc3 d5 4.Bf4 Bg7 5.e3 0–0 6.Qb3

This move was still relatively rare at the time of the present game. It had occurred in the games Alatorsev-Freiman and Veresov-Alatorsev from the 9th USSR Championship (Leningrad, 1934). Levenfish was certainly aware of both of these encounters - he wrote the tournament book of that event. In the autumn of 1937 it had also been played by Fine against Keres (in the tournament at Semmering) and by the then World Champion Euwe against Mikenas (7th Olympiad, Stockholm). It may therefore have been regarded as a topical line at the time and Botvinnik, unsurprisingly,

appears to have been ready for it. In the 11th match-game, Levenfish had preferred the less ambitious 6.Nf3, which permits Black to obtain the standard Gruenfeld counterplay after 6...c5.

6...c5

Anyway. Levenfish describes this as "an interesting pawn-sacrifice, which had obviously been prepared beforehand". The game now reaches a position that may also be arrived at via the Caro-Kann Defence (1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.ed5 cd5 4.c4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Qb3 Bg7 7.cxd5 0-0 8.Bf4).

The alternative is 6...c6. White then continues 7.Nf3 when Black's normal counterplay with ...c7-c5 has been at least temporarily ruled out. This had been seen in each of the games mentioned in the previous note.

7.cxd5

Also possible is 7.dxc5, but then Black obtains good counterplay with 7...Na6! and now:

a) Black has the initiative after 8.Qa3 Ne4 9.Nxe4 (or 9.Nxd5 e6 10.Nc3 Naxc5 11.Nxe4 Nxe4 12.Rd1 Qb6) 9...dxe4 10.Rd1 Qe8 11.Ne2 e5 12.Bg3 f5.

b) 8.cxd5 Nxc5 9.Qc4 b6.

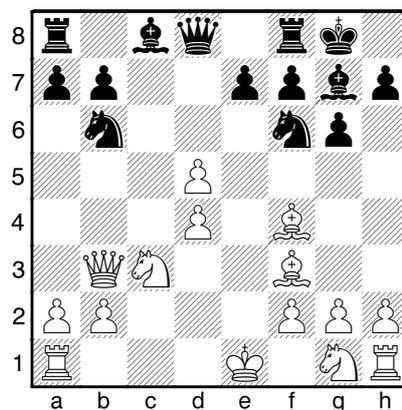
(Variations by Levenfish.)

Also possible is 7...Ne4!? 8.cxd5 Qa5 9.Nge2 Nxc5 (Capablanca-Flohr, AVRO International, 1938).

7...cxd4 8.exd4 Nbd7

An alternative scheme of development is also possible: 8...Na6 9.Be2 Qb6 (or 9...Qa5!? (Matanović-Petrosian, Match Yugoslavia-USSR, Belgrade 1961) 10.Qxb6 axb6, when White probably does best to return the pawn with 11.d6 exd6 12.Nf3, retaining a slight advantage.

9.Be2 Nb6 10.Bf3



10...Bf5

"In the same gambit style. Continuing 10...Bg4, Black regains the pawn, however after 11.Bxg4 Nxg4 12.Nf3 Nf6 13.d6! exd6 14.0-0 White's position is preferable."

This variation, first suggested by Levenfish in 1937, was subsequently tested many times in master practice. For example: 14...Nh5 15.Bg5 Qd7 16.Qb5 Rfc8 17.Qxd7 Nxd7 18.Rac1 Bf8 19.Nd5 (Šajtar-Lilienthal, Match Moscow-Prague, 1946).

11.Rd1

Defending against the threat of 11...Bd3 followed by ...Bc4. As Levenfish pointed out in 1937, 11.a4 fails tactically to 11...Bd3 12.a5 Bc4 13.Qb4 Nbxg4 when the bishop at f4 is attacked.

11...Qd7

Black now threatens to regain the pawn after 12...Rfd8, or 12...Bg4, undermining the defence of the d5-pawn. White must act decisively.

12.h3

The only way to retain any advantage. The move ...Bg4 is ruled out, while White gains time via the threat of 13.g4.

12...h5 13.Be5

White intends to hold onto the pawn at the cost of ceding Black the advantage of the two bishops.

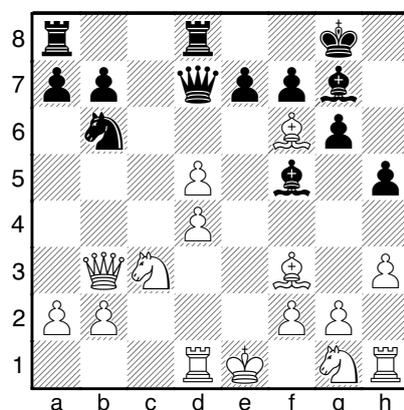
Interestingly, the following year Botvinnik repeated this entire line against Gotthilf (11th USSR Championship Semi-final, Leningrad 1938). There White preferred the alternative 13.Nge2 which permits Black to immediately regain the pawn. Botvinnik instead chose 13...Rad8, which leaves the pawn at a7 and the knight at b6 exposed to the tactical blow Nb5. Play continued 14.d6 exd6 15.0-0 d5 and now 16.Nb5!? (Khalifman) would have retained some initiative for White.

Black should instead continue 13...Rfd8, for example 14.d6 exd6 15.0-0 and now:

a) 15...Rac8!? (Dorfman-Tukmakov, Vilnius 1978).

b) 15...d5 16.Bg5 Bg4!, etc., with promising play for Black (T. Giorgadze-Vaganian, 8th USSR People's Spartakiad, Moscow 1983).

13...Rfd8 14.Bxf6



14...exf6

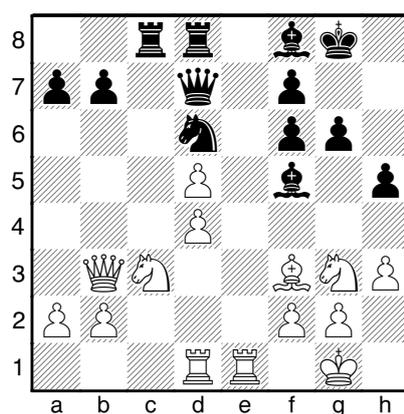
A typical recapture in such situations. Levenfish points out that after 14...Bxf6 15.Nge2 both black bishops stand unsuccessfully. However, after 15...h4 (preventing Ng3) 16.0-0 Rac8 Black has definite compensation for the missing pawn (Gulko-Tukmakov, Zonal Tournament, Lvov 1978).

15.Nge2 Rac8

Black is now ready to transfer the poorly-placed b6-knight to the blockading square d6, by means of ...Nc4.

16.0-0 Nc4 17.Ng3 Nd6 18.Rfe1 Bf8

"Black has constructed a secure defensive position. An exchange at f5 would leave opposite-coloured bishops on the board and could lead to a dead draw. The following move by White is the first link in an interesting strategic plan." (Levenfish)



19.Be4!

An absolutely correct decision.

19...Bxe4 20.Ngxe4 Nxe4 21.Nxe4

Khalifman mentions the possibility of 21.Rxe4!? In his 1937 notes, Levenfish states that after this "routine" continuation Black consolidates his position by 21...Bd6 22.Rde1 a6.

21...Kg7 22.Qf3

The only way to play for an advantage. Black's reply, which weakens the king-side dark squares and in particular the point e5, is forced.

22...f5

Of course, not 22...Be7? 23.d6.

23.Nc3 b5

"It seems as if the tense struggle to regain the pawn at d5 will be crowned with Black's success. How can ...b5-b4 and then ...Qd5 be prevented?" (Levenfish)

Khalifman suggests instead 23...Bb4!?

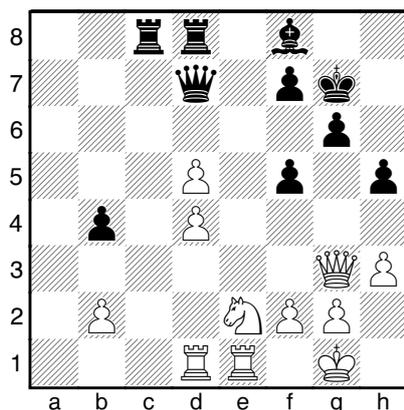
24.a3 a5 25.Qg3

This and White's 27th move are key to his prospects of retaining the advantage. Khalifman points out that 25.Ne2 should be met by 25...b4! (rather than 25...Qxd5?! 26.Qxd5 Rxd5 27.Nc3 .)

25...b4

Black may also consider 25...Bd6 . Then after 26.Qf3 (on 26.Qg5 , as indicated by Levenfish, Black has the strong counter 26...Bxa3!) 26...b4 a way to retain White's advantage is not apparent.

26.axb4 axb4 27.Ne2



27...Kh7?!

A key moment. As Levenfish points out, 27...Rc2 is bad in view of the reply 28.Qb3, when 28...Rdc8 fails to 29.Nc3!.

The point of White's play is that after 27...Qxd5 28.Nf4 Black loses the pawn at h5. Khalifman then quotes a long forcing variation by Riumin, leading to a drawn ending after 28...Qd6(!) 29.Nxh5+ Kh7 30.Nf4 Bh6 31.Ne2 Qxg3 32.Nxg3 Rc2 33.Re2 b3 34.Kf1 Bg7 35.Rxc2 bxc2 36.Rc1 Bxd4 37.Rxc2 Rb8. However, after 27...Qxd5 28.Nf4 Qd6 29.Nxh5+ Kh7 White has the very strong 30.Qb3! gxh5 31.Qxf7+, etc.

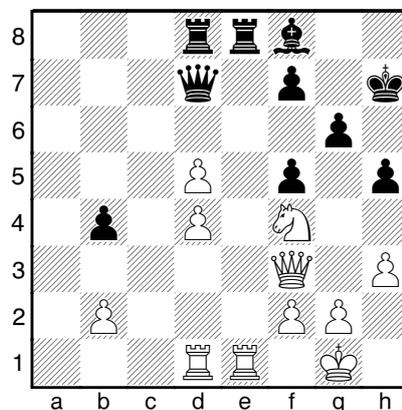
Khalifman points out the possibility of 27...Bd6!? 28.Qb3 Rb8. Black's position in this case certainly remains viable. For example: 29.Rc1 (29.Nc1 Rb5 30.Nd3? Rxd5 - Khalifman) 29...Rb5 followed by ...Qb7 and/or ...Ra8.

28.Nf4 Re8?!

Intending 29...Re4.

"On 28...Bh6 there is the reply 29.Re5." (Levenfish). Khalifman again suggests 28...Bd6!? This was perhaps the last chance for Black to save the game.

29.Qf3 Rcd8



30.Re5!

It is now clear that the struggle around the d5–pawn has in fact been won by White.

30...Bg7

"On 30...Bd6 White had prepared the combination 31.Nxh5! Bxe5 32.dxe5 gxh5 33.Qxh5+ Kg7 34.Qg5+ Kf8 (34...Kh7 35.Rd4) 35.Qh6+ Kg8 (or 35...Ke7 36.d6+) 36.Rd3! f4 37.Qxf4!. Black has an extra rook, but he is defenceless." (Levenfish)

31.Rde1

The point - White can now offer the exchange at this square. "The final link in the plan begun at the 19th move." (Levenfish)

31...Rc8

"After the acceptance of the sacrifice it is difficult for Black to defend against the manoeuvre Qd4, d5-d6 and Nd5. The correctness of the exchange is correct is demonstrated by the variation 31...Bxe5 32.dxe5 Qc7 33.Qe3 Qc4 34.e6 fxe6 (34...Qa6 35.Qg3 - Khalifman) 35.Qa7+ Kh6 36.Nxe6. But to decline the offer is no better." (Levenfish)

32.d6!

With the threat of Re7.

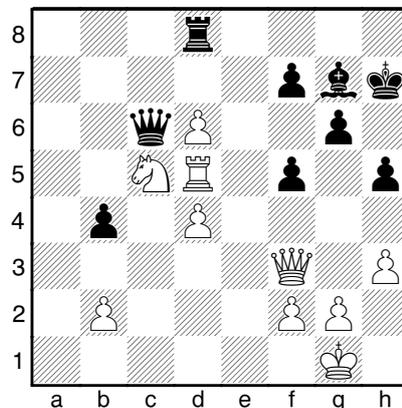
32...Rf8

Equivalent to capitulation. For better or worse, Black had to try 32...Bxe5. For example, 33.dxe5 Rc5 34.Nd5 Re6 (Khalifman).

33.Rd5!

White now threatens both Re7 and the manoeuvre Nd3-e5.

33...Rfe8 34.Rxe8 Rxe8 35.Nd3 Rd8 36.Nc5 Qc6



37.d7!

Typically, Levenfish has calculated very deeply. Black may re-establish material equality, but only at the cost of transition into a technically-lost endgame.

37...Bxd4

"37...Bf8 could have led to the following finale: 38.Rxf5 Qxf3 39.Rxf3 Bxc5 40.Rxf7+ Kg8 41.dxc5 Kxf7 42.c6 Ke7 43.c7 Kxd7 44.cxd8Q+ and White wins." (Levenfish)

38.Rxd4 Qxc5 39.Qd5 Qxd5

Levenfish states that Black could prolong the game, but without changing the result, with 39...Qe7. In his 1937 notes he provides the variation 40.Qd6 Qe6 41.Kf1 Kg7 42.f4, "when after the exchange of queens the rook-endgame is won for White."

He also points out the variation 39...Qc1+ and now:

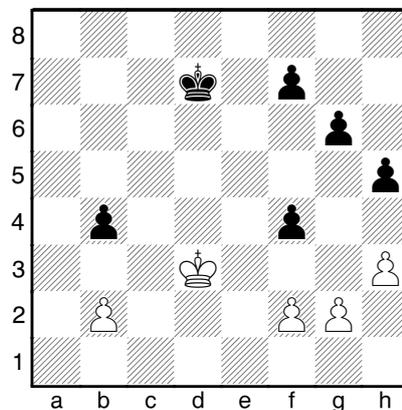
a) 40.Kh2 leads to a draw after 40...Qxb2! 41.Qxf7+ Kh6 42.Qf6 (or 42.Qe7 Qxd4 43.Qxd8 Qf4+ with perpetual check) 42...Rxd7 43.Qh8+ Rh7 44.Qf8+ Rg7 45.Rd7 Kh7.

b) Correct instead is 40.Rd1! Qxb2 41.Qxf7+ Kh6 (or 41...Qg7 42.Qe8 Qf6 43.Re1, with the threat of 44.Re7) 42.Qe7, for example: 42...Qc2 43.Qxd8 Qxd1+ 44.Kh2 Qd6+ 45.g3 Qd4 46.Qf8+ Kh7 47.Qe7+ Kh6 48.Qe3+.

40.Rxd5 Kg7 41.Kf1

"There could have followed 41...Kf6 42.Ke2 Ke6 43.Rd4 Rxd7 44.Rxd7 Kxd7 45.Kd3 Kd6 46.Kc4. Therefore Black resigned the game." (Levenfish)

Soltis provides some interesting background to the end of this game. Concluding that the adjourned position was hopelessly lost, he telephoned the match arbiter (N. Grigoriev) to resign the game and conclude the match. However, Grigoriev - who was also the world's leading authority on pawn-endgame studies, pointed out that 45...f4 (rather than the defeatist 45...Kd6) would set traps. Grigoriev then indicated the variations:



(analysis diagram)

a) 46.Kc4 f3 47.gxf3 g5 48.Kxb4 f5 (in fact, correct is 48...h4 49.Kc4 f5) 49.Kc4 (49.f4! wins) 49...h4, when after 50.Kd4? g4 51.fxg4 fxg4 52.Ke4 gxh3 53.Kf3 Kc7 Black wins; and

b) 46.f3 (best, according to Grigoriev) 46...Ke6 47.Kc4 Ke5 48.b3! (rather than 48.Kxb4 Kd4 49.Ka5 Ke3 50.b4 Kf2, although here 51.b5 nevertheless wins) 48...h4 49.Kc5 g5 50.Kc4 f6 51.Kc5 f5 52.Kc4 g4 53.Kc5 g3 54.Kc4 Kd6 55.Kxb4 Kd5 56.Kc3 Kc5 57.b4+ Kb5 58.Kb3 Kb6 59.Kc4 Kc6 60.Kd4 Kb5 61.Ke5 Kxb4 62.Kxf4 Kc4 63.Kg5! Kd3 64.Kxh4 f4 65.Kg4 Ke3 66.h4 Kf2

67.Kh3.

However, Botvinnik refused to accept the help of the match arbiter, even though (according to the Botvinnik) the latter indicated that Levenfish had been using the assistance of a group of young masters during the match. An interesting account, despite the rather shaky analysis of the pawn-ending.

It is hard to find any fault with Levenfish's play in this game. This have been a particularly significant moment for him. With this victory he retained the title of Soviet Champion, and became only the second player (after Botvinnik) to receive the title of Soviet Grandmaster. To put the result of this match in context, against the world's best players in the 2 Moscow internationals and at Nottingham, Botvinnik had lost 3 games out of 51. Against Levenfish, he had lost 5 games out of 13. However, despite this obvious demonstration of his class, Levenfish was never to receive the invitations to foreign international events that his results surely warranted.