

Korchnoi and his Chess Grandchildren

By

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with invaluable help from Alexander Bykovsky



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Publisher's Foreword

Korchnoi and his Chess Grandchildren is our second attempt to publish a book by or about Viktor Korchnoi. Back in 2009 we spoke to Viktor and he agreed to write a book about the French Defence. We were elated and work began, but sadly Viktor decided that completing the project would take more energy than he had to spare, given he was still playing competitively. A couple of years later, at the age of 80, he won the 2011 Swiss Championship.

Even though no book resulted, we remember that project fondly. One example: the editor Andrew Greet had expanded a bare piece of analysis with the comment: "White is probably better." Viktor saw that addition, and sent the instruction: "Delete the word 'probably' here and everywhere."

The present book features 25 of Korchnoi's best games from the latter stages of his glorious career, with the earliest from 1997 and the latest from 2011, when Korchnoi was still potent enough to defeat Fabiano Caruana. The annotations are mainly in Korchnoi's own words, with occasional additions from other top players or the authors. Between the annotated games are numerous articles and interviews – some with Viktor, and others featuring top players talking about the great man. So in the pages that follow you will also find the views of Boris Gelfand, Ruslan Ponomarev, Viorel Bologan and others.

This book was first published in Russian in 2012, and the references to opening theory in the annotations have not been updated to the present day, though we have revised some other facts. For example, the biographical information about Korchnoi and his opponents has been updated.

There are two authors, Vladimir Barsky and Alexander Bykovsky, though it is fair to say that Vladimir did the lion's share of the writing. The pages that follow also benefit from many photos, including some from Korchnoi's personal archive – Viktor's son Igor confirmed we could use that archive, for which we thank him.

John Shaw
Glasgow 2022

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Reaching Out and Grabbing

Extract from a conversation between Viktor Korchnoi and Alexander Roshal, editor-in-chief of "64", after the Tatarstan – Europe match that took place in Kazan. The home team was represented by Alexey Dreev, Sergey Rublevsky, Andrey Kharlov, Ildar Ibragimov, Alisa Galliamova and Artyom Timofeev. Europe's team featured Anatoly Karpov, Alexander Khalifman, Viktor Korchnoi, Vladimir Akopian, Maia Chiburdanidze and Viorel Bologan. The match ended with the score of 6:6. Korchnoi drew twice with Kharlov. ("64" No. 8/2001)

The years have not changed Korchnoi. As ever, he is the chief fighter and most ardent champion of his team – no matter who else is playing for it. This time he had occasion to create a "study" in one of his games with Andrey Kharlov, and it could be seen that this creation involved an extraordinary effort of will (there was no way he could ever let his younger comrades down). Korchnoi was afterwards awarded a special prize.

Karpov was hurrying away somewhere, and left the closing banquet early. His opponent from bygone days completely loosened up, and in the midst of a youthful ensemble he performed some frivolous songs. Taking advantage of the fact that Korchnoi had entirely lowered his guard, the "64" correspondent proposed a special toast:

"At one time Korchnoi and I had a friend in common who loved to repeat: 'Life is a harmful business, you can die of it.' Well, chess life is a *special* business. I've got two photographs to take away from Kazan: there's Karpov and me supporting Korchnoi, and Korchnoi and me supporting Karpov. And could I have imagined I would be merrily chatting with Viktor just when he was autographing his 'Anti-Chess' book in which he devoted some heartfelt lines to me? So let's drink to our wonderful chess life!"

Let's come back to the Kazan match, to your games with Kharlov.

With Kharlov? I'll try to keep my voice down, so as not to offend anyone... But how could Kasparov take on someone with a baby face as a trainer? He's got a boundless potential for learning. But they invited him of all people to work for them. When I played him I had a completely won game by move six. There were lots of ways I could have won... No doubt this made me relax, and I started playing sloppily...

Then in the second game, Kharlov played on and on against me in a simple position. I thought, are you testing me? But it wasn't people like that who used to test me. In such positions Petrosian did. But Kharlov kept playing for reasons of his own... Altogether I may say that in both games I lost my sense of caution.

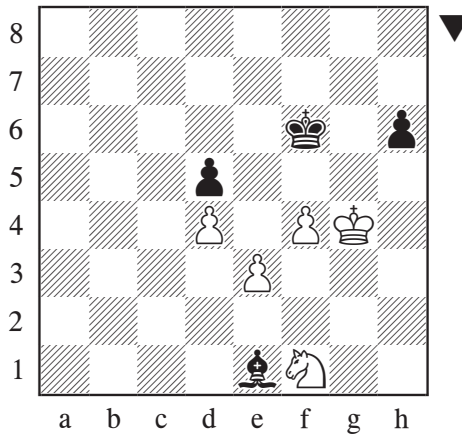
But then you recovered it. Karpov said, “Korchnoi was playing lousily at first, then he played like a genius.”

No. In the first game it wasn't as bad for me as all that. In the second, if we'd been playing to Ilyumzhinov's time control with Fischer clocks, Kharlov might have beaten me. As it was, with 25 minutes left, he felt he was badly off for time, that the end was approaching. With a half-minute increment under “Ilyumzhinov” timings, he would have repeated moves and had a think. And he might have found the right way...

Kharlov played correctly against me up to a point. But he shouldn't have taken on h5.

Andrey Kharlov – Viktor Korchnoi

Kazan (2) 2001



54...h5†!

This is such a rare sort of move... Kharlov had to find the strength in himself to think and play something other than what he did – move the king away, reposition his knight...

And blockade the pawn somewhere? Karpov had a position like this, and he didn't take the pawn.

Quite right. It was a complex position, against Kasparov – in the 9th game of their first match. But you need to take time over these things.

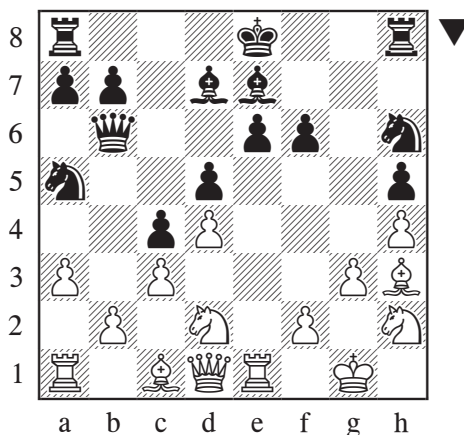
Was this draw an endgame study composed at the board (55.♔xh5 ♕f5 56.♔h6 ♖f6 57.♔h7 ♕f2 58.♔g8 ♕e1 59.♔f8 ♕h4 60.♖h2 ♕g3 61.♖f1 ♕h4 62.♔e8 ♖e6 63.♖h2 ♕f2 64.♖g4 ♕g1 65.♔d8 ♖f5 66.♔d7)?

No. But I guessed it would be difficult for him to play it. I checked on h5, and he took. He had a baby-faced look. The easiest thing in chess, or anywhere else, is to reach out and grab. And so he did.

Or take my second game with Grischuk at Biel. It seemed he had the advantage. I offered him a pawn and he took it.

Alexander Grischuk – Viktor Korchnoi

Biel (7) 2001



14...0-0 15.♔xh5

And there you are – already he has no idea what to do with his extra pawn. I wrested the initiative from him. After the game I said, “What came over you? You’re such an active type of player, but all I have to do is tempt you with a pawn so as to take over the initiative.” He replied, “You take pawns too...” That’s not the point. Essentially it’s a philosophical choice: either you’re a player who takes material, or you aren’t! I have known chessplayers who were always true to themselves in making sacrifices to fight for the initiative. And you couldn’t tempt *them* with a pawn. I named Alekhine, Geller, Kupreichik. This isn’t a reproach, but food for thought. Choose which line you take.

It seemed to me this was like a proverb, a kind of cliché: Petrosian sacrifices the exchange, Tal opens lines, and Korchnoi takes pawns...

But I’m inclined to self-criticism – and to change, according to my understanding of myself and the situation. Understanding means giving something away when you know it’s not just random but for some form of initiative...

I sense a critical note in your attitude to Grischuk.

There are both critical remarks and ones that express praise. The point is we're talking about a human being, not a computer. He's a thinking chessplayer. When we agreed the draw, Grischuk showed me how I should have played for a win. Not many people would have decided to do that.

15...♖dg8 16.♗e2 f5 17.♘df3 ♘b3 18.♙xh6 ♖xh6 19.♗ad1 ♙xh4 20.♘xh4 ♖xh4 21.♙g2 ♖h7 22.♘f3 ♘a5 23.♗d2 ♗d6 24.♘e5 ♙a4 25.♖b1 ♘c6 26.♗f4 ♘c7 27.♖e2 ♘xe5 28.♗xe5 ♗xe5 29.♖xe5 ♘d6 30.♖be1 ♖h6 31.♖5e2 f4

½-½

And then again – at the end of a game with Pelletier, in which he grabbed one of my pawns, I said to him, “Such moves should always be punished.” But instead of that, I threw away a second one... However, Pelletier wasn't capable of playing any more – he was waiting for my flag to fall... I had 10 seconds left for 16 moves. I twice played two moves within a second. I was in an utterly hopeless situation, but by the time the flag did fall, the position had become unclear.

I repeat, Grischuk is a lad who thinks. I hope the “lesson” will help him. By the way I discovered that he had been the first to offer a draw, but I didn't hear him. I made my move and offered a draw myself. “I offered *you* a draw,” he said...

And a thing with Lautier... You really must publish this: when an older person addresses a young one, the young one can't just refuse to answer. This isn't against the laws of chess but it's against human ethics. It's very discourteous. He ought to say something.

And should the older person answer the young one too?

He should. Everyone's obliged to answer. If someone comes up to you in the street and speaks to you, what do you do? I don't know, maybe he's black and you're white, and you just walk away. But why are there different rules in chess? You can make a move and ignore him – in the laws it says that to make a move is to refuse the draw.

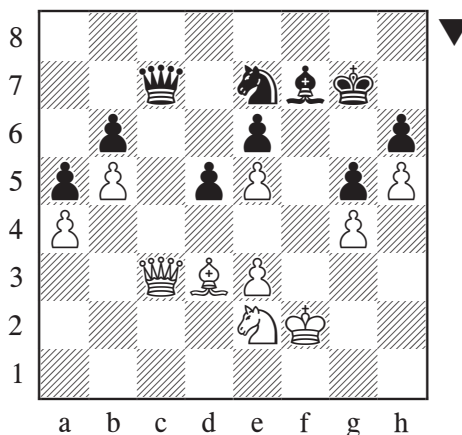
So unethical behaviour is legitimized?

Quite. A breach of human ethics rather than sporting ethics. It's what happened in my second game with Lautier at the same Biel tournament. To begin with, he caught me in a variation I didn't know anything about, whereas he knew it all. I was trying to get away from the theory, and pretty soon I was in a hopeless position. He reckoned it was all over and made some simple move out of general considerations... I jumped out. And I offered him a draw. That was a mistake. He didn't answer. Then after the fortieth move I blundered a rook away.

Here's something that occurred at Biel in my first game with Grischuk. He offered an exchange of queens after which he could have dug himself in and held the draw. I avoided exchanging. He was in time trouble, I wasn't. Then at some moment – I didn't even recall it (he told me about it afterwards) – I played ♗c3 allowing the queen exchange.

Viktor Korchnoi – Alexander Grischuk

Biel (2) 2001



He quickly played **40...♙b8?**. After this it's utterly hopeless for him, as he can't return to the c-file. After the game I asked him, "Did I really offer a queen exchange myself?"

"Yes," he said, "that's what you played."

"Then why didn't you take it?"

"Well I had two seconds left, I was afraid of losing on time before my hand got to c3."

And now I'll tell you what happened in my second game with Pelletier. Time trouble. I looked at the clock (not knowing how many moves had been played). I had one second! I made a move. He made a move. I banged another move down – that one was made in half a second! The time would have run out otherwise. That was move 40, as I found out afterwards. That means that all my success lay in that half second. Grischuk was afraid to play a "long move" when he had two seconds left, but I managed to play a move in *half* a second.

If you *hadn't* managed it, would you cease to talk about records and longevity?

What records! What longevity! Otherwise no one would congratulate me. And there would be no point in doing a cross-country run before a tournament. How ridiculous!

Not at all bad for an ageing man that everyone wants to be photographed with, as a memento?

When people ask to be photographed with me, I picture myself as one of those lions on the banks of the Neva.

Does it occur to you to ask where you go from here? Have you a plan for your chess life?

No. For the present I get invitations, and I'm satisfied. I've got a very interesting tournament in Buenos Aires coming up. Polgar, Karpov, Xie Jun, Short, Radjabov, the Brazilians Milos

and Mecking, and local players. Of course Mecking's strength has declined since the time when he twice won Interzonal Tournaments... He had a severe illness, something like multiple sclerosis, but he survived. And he became a priest. And he said, "God granted me life so that I could continue to play chess."

What next for me? After Buenos Aires I'm playing for the St Petersburg team in the European Championship in Crete, then there's a tournament in Holland. And straight after that, "veterans against women". I even play in the "Ilyumzhinov" events...

Here I insert a stage direction: "Interviewee's eyes beam with delight!"

But have I given good answers to the silly press-conference questions? When *you're* seventy years old and everyone approaches you and says why did you come, will you give us an interview, are you going to write... then you'll decline. For me, though, it's interesting!

Alexander Grischuk

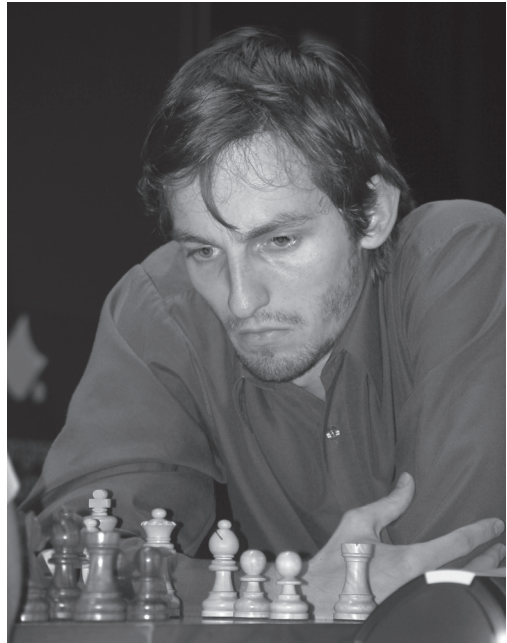
Russia

Born 31 October 1983

Highest rating: 2810 (December 2014)

In 2000 the 17-year-old Grischuk caused a sensation by reaching the semi-final of the FIDE World Championship. His subsequent performances showed that that success was no accident; he established himself firmly among the world's elite.

Grischuk was Russian Champion in 2009 and a Candidates match finalist in 2011. He was a member of the winning Russian team in the Olympiads of 2000 and 2002, and in the World Team Championships of 2005 and 2009. Alexander is extremely strong at fast time limits, as he proved by winning the World Blitz Championship in 2006, 2012 and 2015. He has repeatedly advocated holding contests with a rapid time control as frequently as possible.



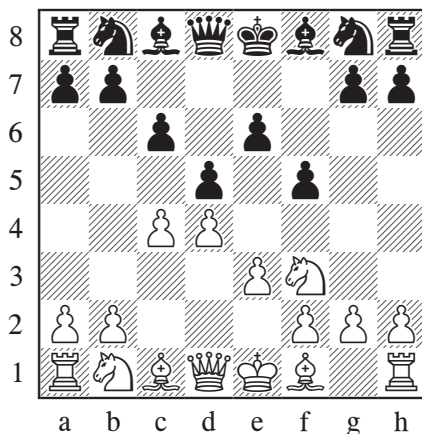
Game 8

Viktor Korchnoi – Alexander Grischuk

Biel (2) 2001, *Dutch Defence A84*

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 c6 4.e3 f5

In his youth, Grischuk was very fond of this transposition. He would begin the game with the Slav Defence, arranging his pawns on c6, d5 and e6. If White in reply chose a restrained system with e2-e3, Grischuk would straight away erect a Stonewall with ...f7-f5. The logic of these actions is understandable. Adherents of Dutch formations are above all loath to face White's plan of a kingside fianchetto. Playing g2-g3 with the e-pawn on e3 is scarcely effective. Grischuk obtained good practical results with this system for Black: he won some games, drew several and lost only once – to Viktor Lvovich Korchnoi.



5.♙d3 ♘f6 6.0-0 ♙d6 7.b3 ♚e7

White wanted to exchange the dark-squared bishops by ♙c1-a3. Black prevents this.

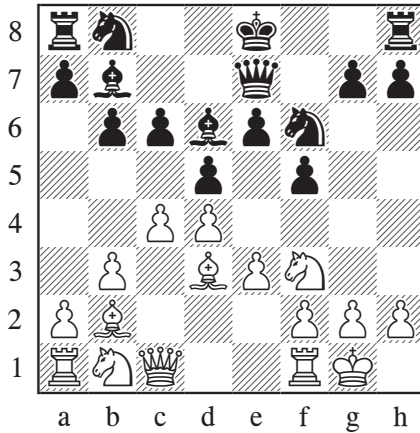
8.♙b2 b6

The main line here is 8...0-0. That position too, of course, has occurred in Korchnoi's games: 9.♚c1 ♘e4 (after 9...b6!? 10.♙a3 c5 11.♘c3 ♙a6 12.dxc5 ♙xc5 13.♙xc5 ♚xc5 Black was close to equalizing in Korchnoi – Malakhov, Tomsk 2001) 10.♙a3 ♘d7 11.♙xd6 ♘xd6 12.♘e5 ♘f7 13.♘xf7 ♚xf7 14.♘c3 ♘f6 15.f3 And White's position was more pleasant in Korchnoi – NN, London (simultaneous) 2010.

9.♚c1

White insists on exchanging bishops on a3 all the same, and it's hard for Black to do anything to oppose this.

9...♙b7



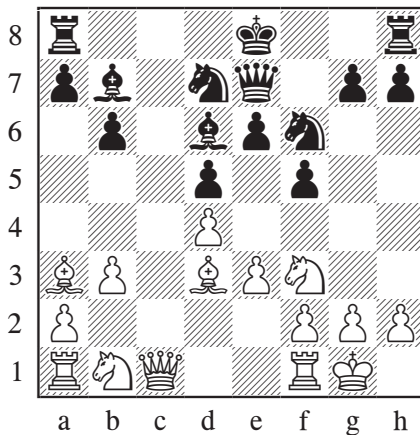
10. ♖a3

It would evidently be more precise to exchange on d5 first: 10.cxd5 cxd5 (Black can't play 10...exd5 as he would lose the f5-pawn), and only now 11. ♖a3.

10... ♖bd7

A slight improvement is 10...0-0, keeping the options open for this knight (in some lines it might go to c6). Nonetheless, in that case too Black experiences distinct difficulties, as the following examples from grandmaster practice demonstrate: 11. ♖xd6 ♗xd6 12. ♘c3!? ♖bd7 (or 12... ♘e4 13. ♘e2 ♖d7 14. ♗b2 a5 15. ♖fd1 ♗e7 16. a3 c5 17. cxd5 exd5 18. a4 and White had an edge in Jojua – Tregubov, Konya 2011) 13.cxd5 ♖xd5 14. ♖d1 ♖ac8 15. ♖c4 ♖7f6 16. ♗b2 ♖fd8 17. h3 White was a little better in Ivanchuk – Nogueiras, Havana 2007.

11.cxd5 cxd5



12. ♖xd6

A quick draw had come about in another of Grischuk's games, played in the same year but a little earlier: 12. ♗b2 ♖xa3 13. ♘xa3 0-0 14. ♖ac1 ♖fc8 15. ♘b5 draw, Onischuk – Grischuk, Tomsk 2001.

Game 8 – Korchnoi – Grischuk, 2001

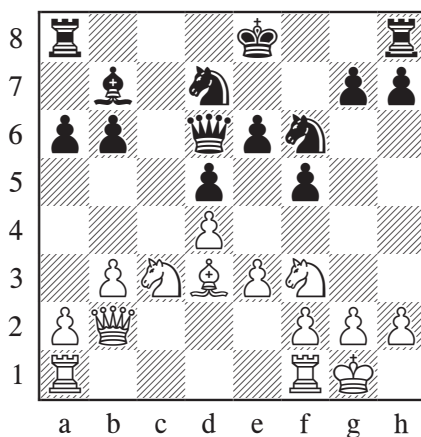


12...♙xd6 13.♘c3 a6

Black has to spend a tempo and place another pawn on the same colour as his bishop, in order to defend against a knight incursion via b5 to c7.

14.♙b2

White has a slight but enduring plus. After the exchange of the bishop on d6 it isn't simple for Black to create any real counterplay on the kingside, and his bishop on b7 is very passive. On the other hand his position is very solid – a wall is a wall!



14...0-0 15.b4

First of all Korchnoi extends his queenside territory.

15...♞ac8 16.a4 ♘e4 17.♘e2

White has no use for unnecessary exchanges. The point is that his opponent, among other things, has a fairly constricted position – the black pieces are quite crowded in their own camp. If appropriate, White can bring his knight to f4 to take aim at the weak e6-pawn.

17...♞e7

Grischuk frees the d6-square for his knight, so that it can jump from there to c4.

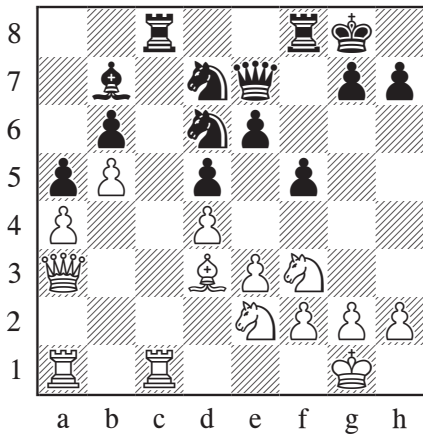
Doubling rooks on the open c-file would not solve all his problems either: 17...♞c7 18.♞fc1 ♞fc8 19.♘f4 White has an edge.

18.♞fc1 ♘d6 19.b5!

An important move; Black would otherwise play ...b6-b5 himself and shut the c-file tight with ...♘d6-c4.

19...a5 20.♞a3!

The absence of dark-squared bishops makes itself felt: this pin proves quite awkward for Black.



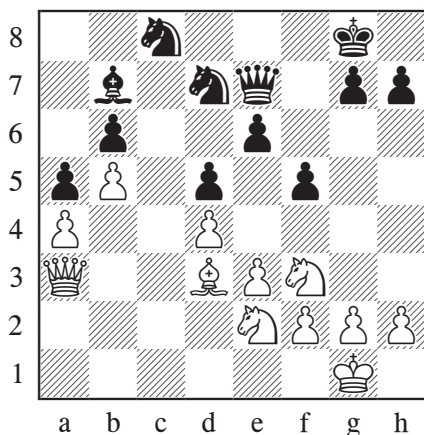
20...♞xc1†

Going over to rigid defence.

It was worth considering the risky-looking 20...e5!?, for example: 21.♞xc8 ♞xc8 22.dxe5 ♘xe5 23.♘xe5 ♞xe5 24.♞c1 ♘c4, and Black obtains distinct counterplay.

On the other hand 20...♔f7?!, as recommended by Rybka (though without searching to a very great depth), can hardly be good; at any moment the king might be vulnerable to a check from e5 or g5.

21.♞xc1 ♞c8 22.♞xc8† ♘xc8



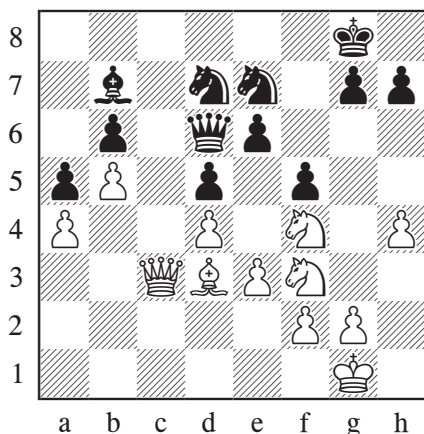
23. ♔c3

Korchnoi reckons that with queens on the board he will have more chances to exploit his advantage.

Of course in the event of 23. ♔xe7!? ♘xe7 24. ♖f4 ♘f8 25. ♗e5 Black is not to be envied, but White might simply not have enough resources to penetrate his opponent's defence.

23... ♗d6 24. ♗f4 ♘e7 25. h4!?

Nimzowitsch called this method of play “creating a second weakness”. Black has one weakness already – the c7-square, which he must constantly guard against an invasion. Now Korchnoi also tries to breach the kingside.



25... ♘f8

By now Black is indeed in dire trouble. He isn't yet in zugzwang of course, but he has severe problems finding moves. He has no counterplay at all and must stand and watch how his opponent strengthens his position.

26.h5 ♖c8 27.♗e5 ♖d7 28.f3 ♕e8

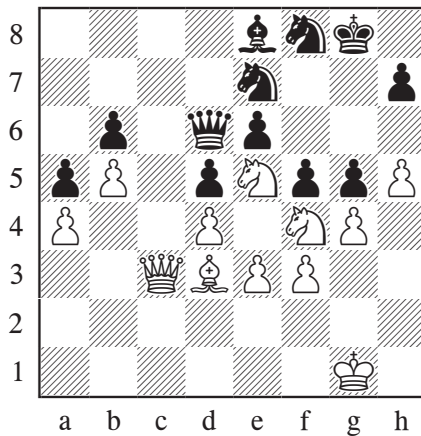
It's hard to say in what way e8 is a better square than b7. True, from here the bishop is attacking the h5-pawn, but nothing more than that is achieved.

29.g4!

Making use of the fact that his opponent is bound hand and foot, White continues his kingside pawn offensive.

29...g5!?

An attempt to muddy the waters.



30.♗e2

Korchnoi decides not to go in for complications.

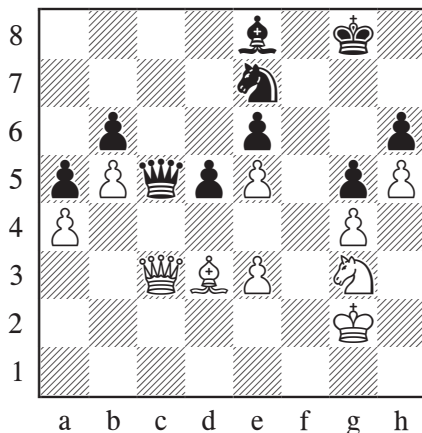
However, it was worth thinking about the straightforward 30.hxg6 hxg6 (30...♗fxg6 31.♗h5 looks very dangerous) 31.♗f2!?, stepping up the pressure. Now Grischuk succeeds in clearing the air a little.

30...♗d7 31.♗g2 h6 32.♗g3 fxg4 33.fxg4 ♗xe5

The knight on e5 can't be tolerated for ever.

34.dxe5 ♖c5

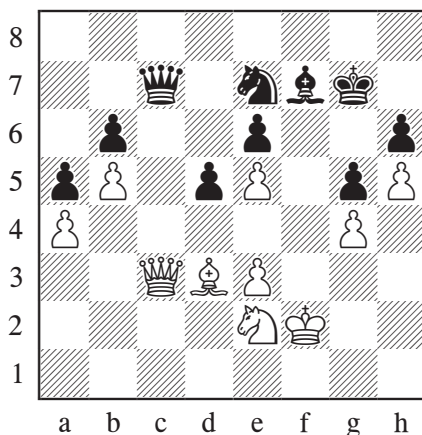
Black might seem to have the worst behind him, but this isn't so; his minor pieces, just as before, are deprived of any scope.



35.♞d2 ♞c7 36.♞b2 ♖g7 37.♞e2

An outpost on d4 is the dream of any chess knight.

37...♖g8 38.♖f2 ♙f7 39.♞d4 ♖g7 40.♞c3



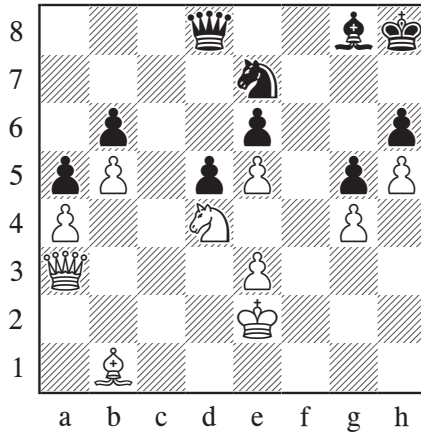
40...♞b8

In the conversation with Roshal that we reproduced above, Korchnoi revealed why Black declined the exchange of queens here.

Still, in fairness we should note that after 40...♞xc3 41.♞xc3 Black's position is probably untenable anyway. White will soon carry out e3-e4, after which the disparity in piece activity should tell.

41.♞d4 ♞d8 42.♖e2 ♙g8 43.♙b1 ♖h8 44.♞a3

White improves the placing of his pieces to the maximum, and prepares the decisive invasion of his opponent's camp – naturally by way of the dark squares that were already weakened in the opening.



44... ♖c8

He must defend against the threat of ♕a3-d6.

45. ♖g6 ♜g7 46. ♖b1 ♜h8 47. ♕c1! ♞e7

The queen can't be allowed onto c6 either. But the knight can't keep pace with the queen.

48. ♕f1! ♞c8 49. ♞c6

Now 49... ♕d7 would be met by 50. ♕f8 with decisive threats, so Black resigned.

1-0

Games like this tend to put people off Dutch formations for a long time. Indeed after 2001 Grischuk didn't play the Dutch for nearly 10 years!