

Introduction

Writing this book about Reshevsky was almost a process of discovery, a very pleasant one.

When I began to play I was very young, not even a teenager. I quickly learnt who Reshevsky was, but for me he was not an attractive personality. His best period was already history, and the name of Bobby Fischer put all others in the shade, except for a few, and almost all of them Russians.

Besides, Reshevsky had beaten Najdorf in two matches, and therefore he would hardly rouse much enthusiasm in a beginner who lived in Buenos Aires.

There was a book *Reshevsky frente al tablero* published by Editorial Sopena, a splendid Argentinean publishing company, but it didn't interest me at all ... so much dull stuff collected together!

Years later and especially as I prepared this book, I discovered how extraordinary Reshevsky was.

He was one of the best players in the world for thirty years and was amongst the top five for at least ten years. I also came to appreciate the aforementioned book.

Later we'll look at what other great champions thought of his playing. A number of things surprised me. One is that he was so strong, having hardly played any serious chess for almost a decade at the start of his career, following his first masters' tournament.

That could have destroyed his chances of becoming a very strong chess player; and the likelihood of his becoming one of the best in the world, which he was, seemed almost impossible.

Amazingly, those years lost to chess did not harm his potential.

We cannot know what would have happened if he had devoted himself to chess without a break. It's logical to think that he would have been a top candidate for the world title for many years.

There is a general consensus that his strong point was his tactical play, which allowed him to benefit from his habitual time trouble, during which he played well and made fewer mistakes than his opponents, who were not pressed for time.

Some very strong masters consider that his manoeuvring play was not as good as his tactical play, but I gained a different impression, as we shall see in the book.

What is clear is that his opening preparation was below what was needed in order to compete with players of his level on an equal basis at that time.

He wrote a number of books, although it is also said that in fact, he was not the real author. It's quite likely that he didn't physically write them, but that doesn't mean that he didn't provide the variations and the main ideas, as happened with other famous books.

For instance, in Najdorf's book on the 1953 Zurich Candidates Tournament, Don Miguel provided the variations and the ideas, but as his Spanish was not good enough, it was his assistant, the journalist and writer Amilcar Celaya, who put them into correct Spanish.

I believe that something similar happened with some of Reshevsky's books.

Reshevsky reminded me of Najdorf in some respects. They were almost the same age, both were Polish, and they were rivals to be the best non-Soviet player at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s. Their greatest similarity was their will to win "by hook or by crook."

According to those who knew them both, Najdorf was a nicer person, whereas Reshevsky was the better player.

This book has been written with exercises and with answers to questions that the reader might ask, which I believe is a good teaching method.

I hope that the admiration I feel for Reshevsky will be reflected in the book and that the reader will find it useful, both for training and for teaching.

GM Zenón Franco Ocampos
Ponteareas, December 2023

Reshevsky's early years, as told by himself

Samuel Herman Reshevsky (Szmul Rzeszewski, Ozorków, Poland, 26th of November 1911 – New York, USA, 4th of April 1992).

Reshevsky said that chess was something he did naturally, like breathing, which didn't require any special effort on his part.

On the subject of his constant time trouble, he explained that sometimes he used up many minutes to make just one move, but that this thinking time helped him to work out a general plan for the whole game. And that when the critical moment arrives, "I am able to grasp the basic requirements of each position."

He became famous at the age of eight, which was "a mixed blessing" (Reshevsky).

Largely because of that fame he left his native Poland and in 1920, at eight years old, accompanied by his parents he gave a series of simultaneous displays in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London and other European cities.

On November 3rd, 1920, he arrived in New York, again with his parents, joined the Marshall Chess Club, and became acquainted with Frank J. Marshall, at that time Champion of the USA.

They immediately organised several exhibitions in New York, and for two years he gave displays throughout the United States.

Between Europe and the USA, for four years Reshevsky was a popular attraction. People watched him in amazement, scientists and psychoanalysts studied him and journalists wrote fantastic stories about his future.

That was a long way from being a "normal" childhood and adolescence, but it had its compensations, which Sammy enjoyed, such as travelling from city to city with his family, playing hundreds of games and winning most of them, as well as being the centre of attention, the main attraction wherever they arrived.

Reshevsky admitted that he failed to understand why all that was happening to him.

In 1924 Reshevsky gave up chess, for a while. Young Sammy, with so many tours on the go, hadn't been to primary school. Therefore, his parents were taken to court in Manhattan for failure to provide suitable custody for a child.

Fortune was on their side. In 1924 Reshevsky was giving a display in Chicago, where he was asked to play an exhibition match against a master in the house of Julius Rosenwald, a well-known magnate and philanthropist.

The name Rosenwald is associated with the Rosenwald Trophy Competitions, played in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, where the mature Reshevsky and the young Bobby Fischer faced each other for the first time.

Rosenwald was delighted with the child's talent and offered to sponsor him, on condition that he finished his studies.

He invited the Reshevsky family to go and live in Detroit in the home of Morris Steinberg, a famous businessman and an official of the Detroit Chess and Drafts Club. Reshevsky's parents very gratefully accepted and that was the end of chess for Sammy for quite some time.

Reshevsky played only two tournaments after his first one in 1922, until 1931, in order to complete his education.

"Six months with a private tutor equipped me to begin at the high-school level. After my graduation from high school, I studied accounting for two years at the University of Detroit, after which I transferred to the University of Chicago, where I obtained my degree in 1933," wrote Reshevsky.

As we comment on his games, we shall be looking at his career in more detail.

We shall add only that after qualifying as an accountant he moved to New York and lived in the outskirts of that city for the rest of his life.

He married Norma Mindick and they had three children.

There were periods when Reshevsky played very little, which also made it difficult for him to perform at his best.

Reshevsky's style and characteristics of his play

Let's consider some opinions about Reshevsky's chess. In the first place, let's see what Reshevsky himself had to say about his style and also about his character:

"I am essentially a positional player, although I can conduct an assault with precision and vigour, when the opportunity arises. My style lies between that of Tal and Petrosian. It is neither over-aggressive nor too passive. My strength consists of a fighting spirit, a great desire to win, and a stubborn defence whenever in trouble. I rarely become discouraged in an inferior situation and I fear no one."

That reference to such different styles, Mikhail Tal's aggressive, dynamic play and Tigran Petrosian's positional style, led to some mocking jibes, but when you study his games in depth it doesn't seem too far from reality.

However, if it were necessary to choose a dominant style, it would be positional; as we already mentioned, this was enhanced by the fact that Reshevsky was an excellent tactician, as also was Petrosian, of course.

Robert Fischer:

This was Fischer's opinion of Reshevsky's level of play: "For a period of ten years – between 1946 and 1956 – Reshevsky was probably the best chess player in the world. I feel sure that had he played a match with Botvinnik during that time, he would have won and been world champion."

Arnold Denker:

Denker emphasised Reshevsky's extraordinary competitive skills: "Playing a chess game with Sammy Reshevsky was like trying to shake off a pitbull that clamped its teeth on the leg of your trousers. No matter how you thrashed your leg or chess pieces about, he would not let go."

Max Euwe:

"Although Reshevsky has introduced some good ideas in the openings he is not really to be considered an expert in this field; nor does his greatest strength lie in positional play. He is certainly a great master of the endgame, but what really makes him such a dangerous opponent for anyone is his patience and his great tactical skill. What seems to very many to be a weak point in his armoury – the way he runs into time pressure – has become for this American grandmaster the very hunting ground in which he can display his combinative virtuosity."

Viktor Korchnoi:

Korchnoi studied Reshevsky's play in depth before their duel in the 1968 Candidates.

Korchnoi was astonished that Reshevsky had such good score against Paul Keres, who was always a very difficult opponent for Korchnoi. "At the tournament in Los Angeles (1963) he won both games against Keres – with White and with Black – in excellent style!"

From the large amount of material on Reshevsky's that he had available for analysis he concluded that "In every game played by Reshevsky one could see his indomitable temperament and one could sense his enormous desire to fight and win (...) with an understanding of chess strategy that few could rival."

They had faced each other twice before, drawing on both occasions. Korchnoi described the games thus: "In both he outplayed me with Black. (...) I remembered our game in Buenos Aires 1960. Reshevsky was an Orthodox Jew and according to the demands of his religion he did not work or play on Fridays or Saturdays. Our game was played on a Friday before sunset. Reshevsky outplayed me. He had to seal a move and the sun was already setting. He began looking at his watch and grew anxious. And instead of a winning continuation, he sealed another move, which gave me saving chances. The game ended in a draw and proved very important: in the end Reshevsky and I shared first place in the tournament."

Korchnoi also pointed out Reshevsky's weaknesses:

"Reshevsky has never seriously studied opening theory and he himself has admitted that a lack of deep knowledge is one of his main chess deficiencies. In the middlegame he feels significantly more confident. Enormous tactical talent, original, non-routine evaluation of position – these are the qualities that enable him to beat the best grandmasters in the world. But when you study his games, you gain the feeling that by no means all the positions, where there is a strategic battle, are to Reshevsky's taste: he avoids positions in which one has to manoeuvre and wait; his strategic plans are too pretentious."

Korchnoi, in contrast to other masters, was certainly able to take advantage of Reshevsky's time trouble. "In our match, playing White, he easily outplayed me in the first half of the game. Closer to the time control he would begin playing superficially and release me from his strategic grip. With White I won a couple of quite good and convincing games."

Garry Kasparov:

With regard to one of Reshevsky's wins against Paul Keres (our Game 26), Kasparov commented: "Despite the purely practical errors (...) Reshevsky's play is impressive. Here there is the non-standard handling of the opening, confident actions in unusual situations, iron consistency in the conduct of his plan, and skilful manoeuvring in time-trouble. Even by the standards of modern chess concepts, his mastery deserves the highest evaluation."

Kasparov also pointed out Reshevsky's boundless confidence in his own strengths, his unquenchable thirst for battle, and his deep immersion into the secrets of the position. Kasparov was of the opinion that those qualities were revived, in their own way, in Robert Fischer, who took them to perfection with his passion for all stages of the chess game, amongst which was his excellent work on openings.

Reuben Fine:

“Reshevsky's style is a curious one. (...) Time and again he gets into a poor or mediocre or even lost position, with fifteen or twenty moves to make in two minutes. Bang-bang-bang is all the spectators hear; and when the smoke has cleared - Sammy has won. ¿How does he do it?

Fine tells the story of how some ago Fred Reinfeld had asked him to contribute an article to the book he was writing on Reshevsky and he gave his view:

“My main point was that Sammy's success is primarily due to a will-to-win which was far sturdier than that of any other grandmaster. Others get tired, or excited, or rattled, or lose interest, or lose hope; Reshevsky never.

But, the reader may well object, surely that is not enough. Lots of mortals want to win just as fiercely, and it does them no good. True enough, the will-to-win is only one aspect in which he differs from other masters.

There is more. Technically, Reshevsky is characterised above all by superb tactical skill. Unlike Euwe and Fine he does not bother much about the openings. Unlike Botvinnik he is little concerned with the strategical backbone of the game. What he cares about above all are tactical complications, and these he handles to perfection. That's why he does well in time pressure: with both players moving fast, there is no opportunity for deep strategy – all that counts is tactics. And Reshevsky generally manages to see a little further than the other fellow.”

Lubomir Kavalek:

Kavalek considered that Reshevsky was possessed of great positional understanding but this was only part of his strength, as it depended greatly on his ability to calculate the tactical phase accurately and deeply.

Kavalek wrote that in the book *Title Chess*, Burt Hochberg says that he invited Reshevsky to contribute a regular column to *Chess Life* magazine. After considering several titles they went for “The Art of Positional Play.” After the first few articles a friend said to him in surprise, “Positional play? But Reshevsky is a tactician!” Kavalek added that tacticians often camouflage their style by hiding it behind positional play. This prompted him to reflect further on the question, “why do so many people, even some very good players, assume that “positional” and “tactical” are mutually exclusive terms? Tactics are the fruit of positional play, its underpinning, its justification. If positional play can be compared to the imagination of a sculptor – his vision – tactics can be compared to his hands. Positional play cannot exist without tactics.”

Poor chess memory

Finally, there is an important factor noted by Pal Benko when he accompanied Reshevsky as his second in 1968, first in Los Angeles at the playoff for sixth place in the 1967 Sousse Interzonal against Vlastimil Hort (and Leonid Stein) and subsequently in Amsterdam against Victor Korchnoi: “One problem Sammy had was his memory, which was terrible. During preparation for the Korchnoi and Hort matches, we would study openings all day, and by the evening he wouldn’t remember anything we had looked at. Thus, he was never able to really learn openings in depth, and always used up vast amounts of time in the beginning phase.

Once I realised just how bad his memory was, I was able to have some good-natured fun with him. For example, I showed him a game once and asked, ‘What do you think of this game?’

He said, ‘It’s nothing special at all. These guys weren’t very good.’

‘But Sammy, this is one of your own games!’

William Lombardy in *My System, My Games, My Life*:

“Reshevsky was neither a tactician nor a positional player. He was a complete player who combined and applied pertinent principles with flawless execution. Reshevsky knew how to wait, and how and when to advance.”

Arnold Denker in “The Bobby Fischer I knew and other stories”:

“Sammy handled knights like David Janowski shifted bishops or Geza Maroczy played queen-and-pawn endings. He could out-calculate even Aleander Alekhine in the Byzantine intricacies of knight manoeuvres.”

Max Euwe in “Meet the Masters” (Pitman, 1940):

“Like his fellow Americans, Capablanca and Fine, he has had plenty of experience of lightning chess. Of this he makes good use, often leaving himself fifteen or more moves to make within a few minutes, in a complicated and difficult position, whilst his opponent may have oceans of time; and yet he wins. The explanation is partly psychological. His opponent thinks – even though subconsciously – that it is impossible for Reshevsky not to make some blunder in such terrible time trouble, and consequently he relaxes his own attention. Reshevsky was in time trouble in twelve of his fourteen games in the AVRO tournament!”

Reuben Fine in *Chess marches on!* (Chess review, 1945):

“Reshevsky is the tactician par excellence. Regardless of the nature of the position, he is rarely prepared to accept any conventional judgment and he will exhaust all his resources

Game 5

Experimenting in the opening

In this game Reshevsky plays the French Defence impeccably with Black.

This was a rare occurrence; Reshevsky commented that he seldom played this defence, because he firmly believed that 1...e5 and 1...c5 were better. According to the 2023 Mega Database Reshevsky played it only twice in master tournaments, both at the start of his career.

It is significant that his negative assessment of this defence didn't vary, despite winning the two games in which he employed it and despite the fact that his results when he played against it were hardly outstanding.

▷ **Herman Steiner**

▶ **Samuel Reshevsky**

French Defence [C13]

Syracuse NY, 08.1934

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6

On the other occasion where he resorted to the French Defence, against W.W. Adams, in New York 1936, he preferred 3...♘b4, and also won.

4.♙g5 dxe4 5.♘xe4 ♙e7 6.♙xf6 gxf6

Reshevsky rejected 6...♙xf6 because, even though he considered that this move equalises, he was seeking a more a more complex struggle.

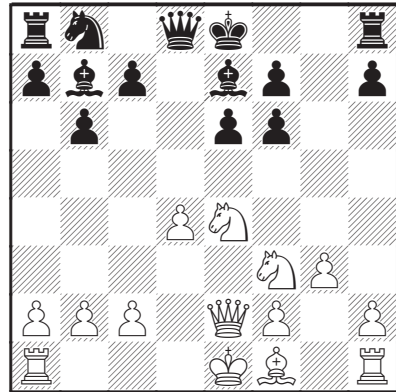
7.♘f3 b6 8.g3?!

A very rarely played move, and not one

to be recommended; much later, in 1999, Svidler used it against Kramnik, although this was in a blitz game.

The most common move is 8.♙d3, or first 8.♙b5+ c6 and now 9.♙d3, or 9.♙c4, followed by ♖e2 and queenside castling.

8...♙b7 9.♖e2



Exercise: What did Reshevsky play here?

Answer:

9...♖d5!

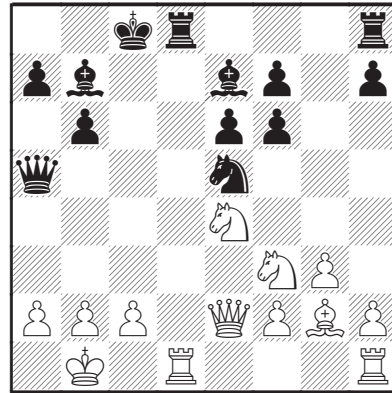
“Improving” on Kramnik! After this strong centralisation Black is the one trying to seize the initiative; although the position remains equal, it's slightly more comfortable to play with Black.

Svidler - Kramnik continued 9...♘d7?!, which allowed White to complete his development with good coordination and after 10.♙g2 f5 11.♘c3 c6 12.0-0-0 White gained some advantage.

Naturally, with more time to think, Kramnik would have played like Reshevsky, and also, with more time available, Svidler wouldn't have played 8.g3.

10. ♖ed2

A retreat that doesn't inspire enthusiasm, but after 10. ♖b5+ ♜xb5 11. ♙xb5+ ♘d7 12. ♖ed2 0-0-0, "Black's bishops give him splendid prospects for the ending," wrote Reshevsky.



Exercise (simple): How did he continue now?

Answer:

10...c5!

Of course; after eliminating White's d-pawn the black pieces gain more squares and better prospects, as Reshevsky pointed out.

Opening up the game while keeping the king in the centre isn't risky here, because the white pieces are passively placed.

11.dxc5

If White drives off the queen with 11.c4?! then after 11... ♖h5 White would only have succeeded in weakening his own position.

11... ♖xc5 12.0-0-0 ♘d7

Black opts for queenside castling and achieves a harmonious position.

13. ♙g2 0-0-0 14. ♘e4

Reshevsky disliked this move and suggested 14. ♘h4 instead, with the idea of trying to equalise in the ending after 14... ♙xc2 15. ♘xc2 ♖d5 16. ♖c4+.

14... ♖a5 15. ♙b1 ♘e5

We're at a critical moment; White's position isn't bad, but he needs to play carefully to avoid slipping into a slightly worse situation; Black's bishop pair means that White must defend accurately.

16. ♘d4?

Now the initiative passes to Black.

The best move was 16. ♘xe5!, and after 16... ♖xe5 17.f4 White's pieces are well coordinated once more.

Question: Why doesn't Black strengthen his centre by recapturing on e5 with the pawn instead of the queen?

Answer: White might not like strengthening the black centre and opening more lines for the bishops, but tactics rule; can you demonstrate that this applies here?

Exercise: How can it be shown that "all that glitters is not gold" after 16...fxe5?

Answer: 17. ♖f3! would be very strong, threatening both 18. ♖xf7 and 18. ♘d6+, and after 17... ♙d5 18.c4! ♙xc4 19. ♘c3

♙d5 20. ♘xd5, followed by 21. ♚xf7, the black position collapses.

Exercise (simple): How did Reshevsky reply to 16. ♘d4?

Answer:

16...f5

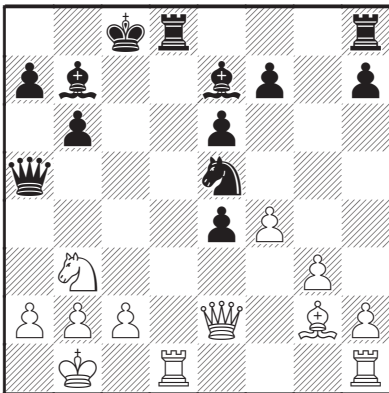
Of course, entering a hand-to-hand combat where the bishops give Black the advantage.

17.f4

The most tenacious response; instead, as Reshevsky pointed out, 17. ♘b3 ♚a6! 18. ♚xa6 ♙xa6 19. ♘c3 ♘g4 20. ♖xd8+ ♗xd8 21.f4 ♙f6 would give Black excellent prospects, as White's position is cramped and the black bishops are strong.

Something similar would happen after 18. ♘c3 ♚xe2 19. ♙xb7+ ♚xb7 20. ♘xe2 ♘g4.

17...fxe4 18. ♘b3



Exercise: Which is the best square for the queen now?

Answer:

18... ♚a6!

Now that Black has a passed pawn, it's appropriate for Black to try to exchange the queens; on the other hand, after 18... ♚a4? 19.fxe5 the e4-pawn is more of a weakness than a strength.

19. ♚xa6 ♙xa6 20.fxe5

Exercise (simple): What had Reshevsky planned to play in this position?

Answer:

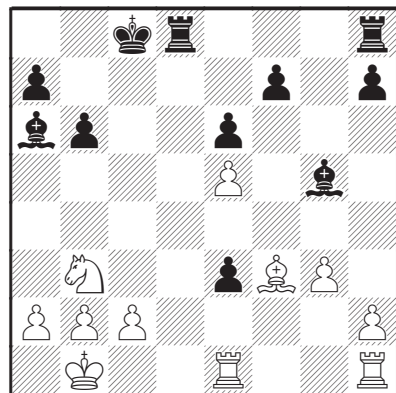
20...e3!

Of course. "A passed pawn on the sixth rank which can be easily defended is most powerful. All of White's energies must be directed toward stopping this pawn" (Reshevsky).

21. ♖de1?

As Reshevsky noted, the pawn can easily be defended; the black position was preferable but abandoning the open file hardly seems the most advisable course for White and it was more resilient to play ♙f3 immediately, retaining the possibility of playing ♖d4 at some point.

21... ♙g5 22. ♙f3



Exercise: How did Black try to make progress now?

Answer:

22... ♖hf8!

Seeking to open the f-file in his favour with ...f6.

23. ♘c1?!

“From this point on White is virtually in zugzwang,” commented Reshevsky, but it isn’t easy to find anything better.

In the event of 23. ♙e2 ♘xe2 24. ♖xe2 f6!, (even better than 24... ♖d5), Black’s advantage is obvious, e.g. after 25.h4 ♙h6 26.exf6 ♖xf6 27.g4 ♙f4, planning ...e5 and ... ♖fd6, White could hardly do anything; Black could even improve his king before taking any concrete measures.

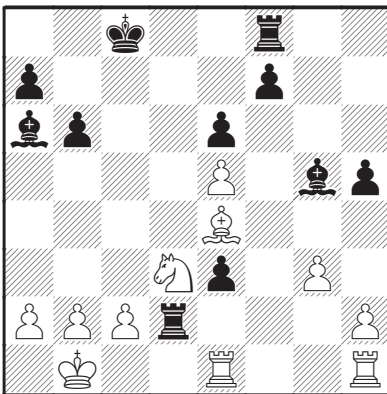
Exercise (simple): What to play now?

Answer:

23... ♖d2

Obviously; you don’t need to be a Reshevsky to see the importance of occupying the seventh rank.

24. ♙e4 h5 25. ♘d3



Exercise: How did Reshevsky continue?

Answer:

25... ♖d8!

Now Black doesn’t need to play ...f6 in order to penetrate with the rook.

Reshevsky found 25...f6 unconvincing in view of 26. ♘f4 ♙xf4 27.gxf4 fxe5 28.fxe5, and now he gave the line 28...e2 29. ♙c1 ♖d4 30. ♙d3 ♙xd3 31.cxd3 ♖f2 32. ♙d2, with good chances of a draw.

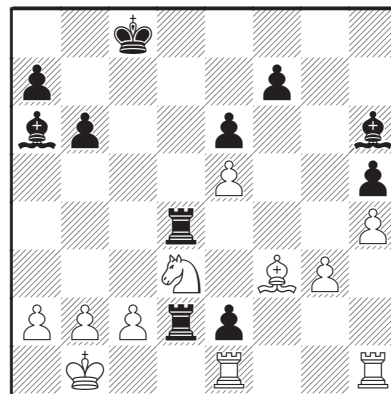
Nevertheless, instead of 28...e2? Black can play the more promising 28... ♙e2!, followed by ... ♖f4, and Black is in complete control; nevertheless, Reshevsky’s move is simpler.

26.h4 ♙h6 27. ♖hf1

If 27. ♘f4 then 27... ♖8d4 is good, but Reshevsky indicated another convincing way, 27... ♙b7, and after the exchange of bishops the black monarch can come into play; after 28. ♙xb7+ ♙xb7, in the event of 29. ♙c1 there would follow 29...e2 and White is paralysed; Black can take on f4 and then prepare the collaboration of the king to help to capture the white pawns.

No better are 29.b3 ♙xf4 30.gxf4 e2 or 29. ♘h5 ♖g2, intending 30... ♖dd2.

27...e2 28. ♖h1 ♖d4 29. ♙f3



Exercise: How did Reshevsky take a decisive step forward?

Answer:

29...♗b7!

As we saw earlier, the exchange of bishops gives Black more squares and makes the e2-pawn more powerful.

“It is this move that establishes the soundness of the previous advance of the e-pawn” (Reshevsky).

30.♗xb7+ ♔xb7 31.b3 ♗e3

Planning 32...♖4xd3 33.cxd3 and now 33...♗f2, or 33...♔c6 followed by...♗d5-d4.

32.g4

The creation of a white passed pawn doesn't really offer White any chances, because Black's second passed pawn will be quicker, but there was no defence; in the event of 32.♖h2 there would follow 32...♖4xd3 33.cxd3 ♖d1+.

32...hxg4 33.h5 g3 34.h6 g2 35.♖h3 ♖d1+ 36.♔b2 ♖xe1

0–1

Game 6

“A grandiose game!”

Reshevsky returned to the United Kingdom fifteen years after his previous visit in order to take part in the traditional Margate tournament in England. This was what motivated his return, in his own words: “At the Syracuse tournament I had succeeded among my contemporaries: could I hold my own against recognized grandmasters? It was with this challenge in mind, and the memory of the international careers of Morphy and Marshall that I entered the tournaments of Yarmouth and Margate”.

The Margate Tournament was held from the 24th of April to the 2nd of May 1935. The entry was no stronger than in Syracuse, with one exception: also taking part was the former World Champion José

Raúl Capablanca. This is how Reshevsky describes it: “I won my encounter with this chess immortal and took first prize in this, my first foreign tournament. Later, I was equally successful against a somewhat weaker field at Yarmouth. With these victories came recognition as one of the world's leading chess players. The prodigy had grown up”. Reshevsky scored 7½/9, Capablanca 7 and Thomas 5.

The Yarmouth Tournament was played from the 8th to the 20th of July. Reshevsky won with 10/11, followed by Seitz with 8½. Reshevsky won ten games and suffered only one defeat, against Vera Menchik, who finished third.

The heading for this game is an expression of admiration from Garry Kasparov