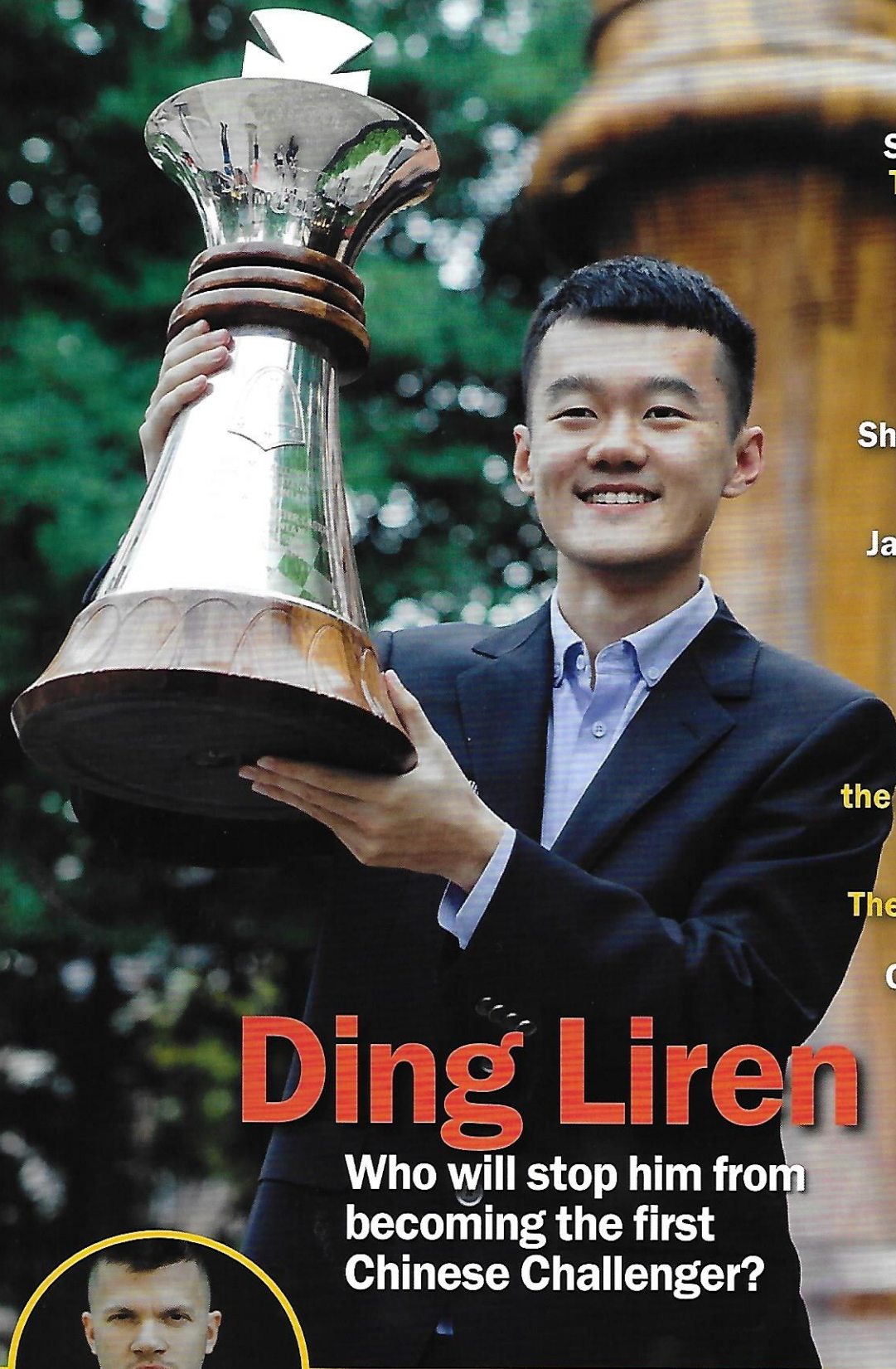


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**SASHA CHAPIN: ALL THE WRONG MOVES**



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Jan Timman

# An old lion passes away

His chess talents were manifold. He was a world-class grandmaster, an eight-time US Champion, the propagator of a most efficient gambit and a prolific composer. **JAN TIMMAN** remembers Pal Benko (1928-2019), who died in Budapest at the age of 91.

**O**n August 26th, the death occurred of Pal Benko, the oldest GM in the world after Yuri Averbakh. He died suddenly. During the Levitov Chess Week in early Augustus, Judit Polgar had told me that she had met Benko recently, and that he had seemed to her to be in good health. But impressions can deceive. Susan Polgar, who announced Benko's death to the world, was of the opinion that he had been in poor health of late. Yet even she was shocked by the suddenness of his death. One thing was certain: Benko had continued to compose all kinds of problems till a very old age, never losing his love of chess.

Benko was a late developer. He was 31 when he played his first Candidates tournament, in Yugoslavia in 1959. The long tournament exhausted him, and he collapsed towards the end. Undaunted, he managed to qualify again for the next Candidates tourna-

ment, Curaçao 1962. On that occasion, Euwe wrote about him: 'By qualifying twice in succession for the Candidates, Benko surpassed all expectations. One good result may be accidental, but two successes are significant. Here they show that Benko's style contains facets that are not evident at first glance, but which, after profound study of his games, become clearer and appear to be of eminent importance in productive play.'

It seems to me that Benko was, first and foremost, a strategist who liked following a strictly defined plan. This also showed in his wins over Fischer and Tal at the start of the Curaçao Candidates. In both games, he went for the strategic opening move 1.g3.

Curaçao was Benko's first tournament under the US flag. A year after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, he had fled the country, immediately adopting an American habit: routinely finding himself in heart-rending time-trouble and often

losing games by exceeding his time limit. This may have contributed to Benko's failure to join the absolute chess pinnacle. If he did manage to find the right plan, there were no time-trouble problems. A good example is the following model game.

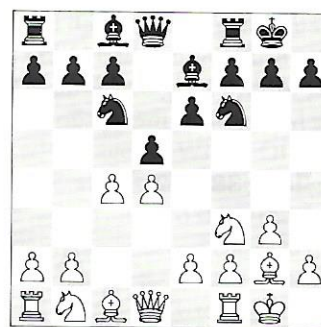
**Pal Benko**

**Mark Taimanov**

Buenos Aires 1960

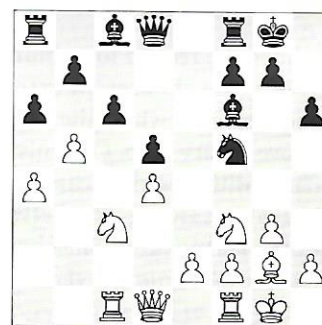
Catalan Opening

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♖g2 ♗f6 4.♗f3  
♜c6 5.0-0 ♖e7 6.d4 0-0



**7.cxd5** If White wants to go for an opening advantage, 7.b3 would be a good move. But Benko has a clear-cut plan: he will be going for the minority attack.

**7...exd5 8.♖g5 h6 9.♖xf6 ♖xf6 10.♜c3 ♗e7 11.♞c1 c6 12.b4 a6 13.a4 ♜f5 14.b5**



**14...♞e8**

An inaccuracy that lands Black into trouble. He should have swapped on b5 first, when after 14...axb5 15.axb5 ♞e8 the position is equal.

**15.bxc6 bxc6 16.e3 h5 17.♜e2 ♗d6 18.♜f4 h4**

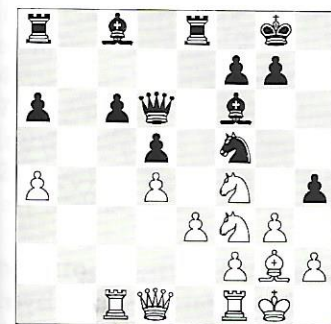
Overly optimistic. Better was 18...g6.





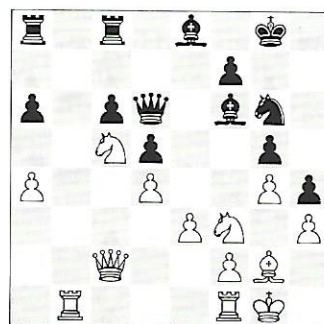
ISIDORE DE VRIES

In the third round of the 1962 Curaçao Candidates tournament, Pal Benko defeated Mikhail Tal. As in his first-round game against Bobby Fischer, which he also won, Benko's first move was 1.g3.



9.g4! A strong advance. White takes the initiative on both wings. 9...g5 20.♘d3 Setting the knight in its way to c5 – the most principled continuation. 20.♘h5 was also very strong. 20...♙e7 21.h3 ♘g6 22.♙c2

♙d7 23.♘c5 ♙ec8 24.♙b1 ♙e8 Black's only chance to prevent encirclement was 24...a5.



25.a5! Everything according to the book. 25...♙c7 26.♙b6 The

siege of the black a-pawn begins. 26...♙ca7 27.♙fb1 ♙e7 28.♙f1 ♘c8 29.♙xa6 ♙xa6 30.♙xa6 ♙d8 31.♙xc8 ♙xc8 32.a6 ♙e7 33.♙b7 ♙d8 34.a7 ♙f8 35.♙f5 ♙e7 36.♙xg5 ♙xg5 37.♙e6 ♙f6 38.♙xf6 ♙xf6 39.♙c7 ♙xa7 40.♙xa7 Black resigned.

At times, Benko was inclined to liquidate to an endgame when he could have won in the middlegame. This was probably connected to his time-trouble problems.

**Pal Benko**  
**Vasily Smyslov**

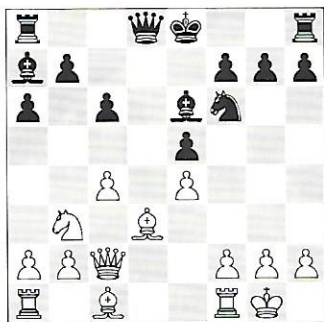
Bled/Zagreb/Belgrade  
Candidates 1959 (11)  
Sicilian Defence, Kan Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 a6 5.c4 ♙f6 6.♙d3 ♘c6 7.♘xc6 dxc6 8.0-0 e5 9.♙c2 ♙c5 10.♘d2 ♙e6 11.♘b3 ♙a7 Black withdraws his bishop to the wrong side. Better was 11...♙e7, with good chances of equality.

A year after the Soviet invasion in 1956, he had fled Hungary, immediately adopting an American habit: routinely finding himself in heart-rending time-trouble.





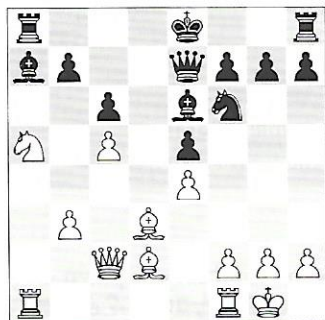


**12.c5!** Now Benko starts setting his sights on the poor position of Black's king's bishop.

**12...a5 13.♗d2 a4 14.♗a5!**

Very strong. White is going to cement his c5 outpost with a tactical finesse.

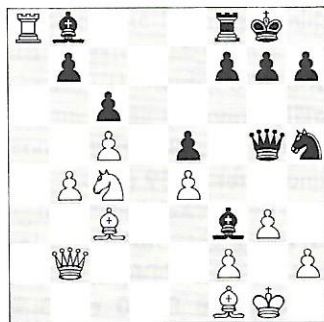
**14...♖e7 15.b4 axb3 16.axb3**



**16...0-0** Black could not capture the c-pawn: 16...♗xc5 fails to 17.♗xc6.

**17.b4** Now Black must spend valuable time to redeploy his king's bishop.

**17...♖ad8 18.♗c3 ♗b8 19.♖fd1 ♗h5 20.g3 ♗c8 21.♗c4 ♗g5 22.♗f1!** A strong retreat. **22...♗g4 23.♖xd8 ♖xd8 24.♖a8 ♖f8 25.♗b2 ♗f3**



Smyslov is desperately trying to find counterplay, but he has failed to solve the problem of his king's bishop.



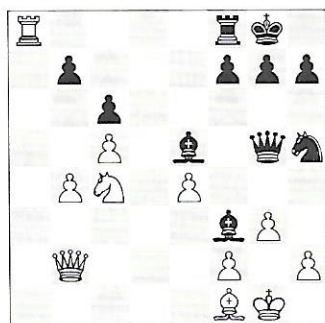
COURTESY WORLD CHESS HALL OF FAME

The participants of the 1963 Piatigorsky Cup in Los Angeles:  
Pal Benko, Svetozar Gligoric, Fridrik Olafsson, Miguel Najdorf, Tigran Petrosian, Samuel Reshevsky, Paul Keres and Oscar Panno.

**26.♗xe5**

Postponing the capture on e5 would have been slightly stronger. After 26.♗a1 ♗xe4 27.♗xe5 ♗xe5 28.♗xe5 ♗e7 29.♗c4 ♗g6 30.♖xf8+ ♗xf8 31.♗d4 White rules supreme.

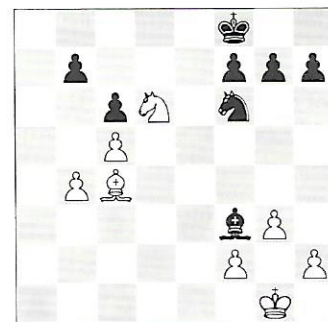
**26...♗xe5**



**27.♗xe5**

And now 27.♖xf8+ ♗xf8 28.♗xe5 would have been very strong. After 28...♗xe4 29.♗a1 ♗e7 30.♗c4 White will exert strong pressure. After the queen swap White wins a pawn, but the chances of a draw are considerable.

**27...♗xe5 28.♖xf8+ ♗xf8 29.♗xe5 ♗xe4 30.♗c4 ♗f6 31.♗d6 ♗f3 32.♗c4**



**32...♗d5?**

A very serious mistake for a player of Smyslov's calibre. What was needed was 32...♗d5 33.♗f1 ♗f3 34.♗xb7 ♗d5 35.b5 cxb5 36.♗xb5 ♗c7 37.♗d6 ♗e7, and White's extra pawn is probably insufficient for the win.

**33.♗xd5**

Of course. Now the game is turning into a classical battle between knight and bishop that is technically winning for White – a job right up Benko's alley: three years later he won a similar endgame against Kortchnoi in Curaçao.

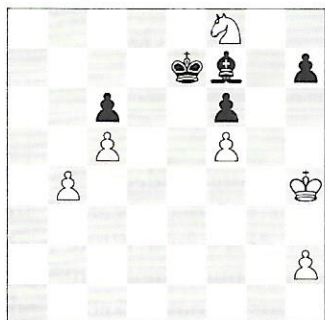
**33...♗xd5 34.♗xb7 ♗e7 35.f4 ♗e6 36.♗f2 f6 37.♗e3 ♗h1 38.♗d6 ♗g2 39.♗d4 ♗h3 40.♗c4 ♗g2 41.♗d6 ♗f1**



42.♖c3 g5 43.♔d4 gxf4 44.gxf4  
 ♕a6 45.f5+ ♖d7 46.♔c4 ♕b5  
 47.♖c3 ♕a6 48.♖b3 ♕b5  
 49.♔d6 ♕e2 50.♖c3

White is in no hurry to work out a winning plan and continues to manoeuvre his pieces.

50...♖e7 51.♔c4 ♖d7 52.♔e3  
 ♖e7 53.♔c2 ♖d7 54.♔d4 ♕f1  
 55.♖d2 ♕c4 56.♖e3 ♕f7 57.♖f4  
 ♕c4 58.♖g4 ♕f7 59.♖h4 ♖c7  
 60.♔e6+ ♖d7 61.♔f8+ ♖e7



62.♔xh7! Sharply calculated. White is going to sacrifice the knight.

62...♕g8 63.♔g5 fxg5+ 64.♔xg5  
 It is striking to see Black's powerlessness in this endgame.

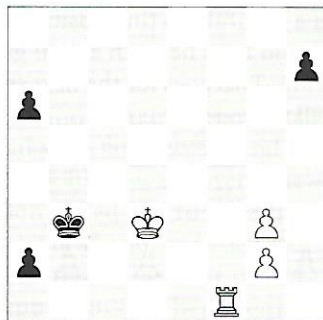
64...♖f7 65.h4 ♖g7 66.f6+ ♖f8  
 67.h5 ♕c4 68.♖f4 ♖f7 69.♖e5  
 ♕d3 70.h6 ♖g6 71.♖e6 ♕c4+  
 72.♖e7 ♕d5 73.f7 ♕xf7 74.h7  
 Black resigned.

### Endgame study virtuoso

Benko was also a late developer in the area of endgame studies. Like the Russian endgame study composer Albert Belyavsky, he was almost 40 before he really settled down to it. In 1967 he won a first prize for the first time, for a study that can be found in virtually all standard works on the endgame. It features the battle between bishop and rook in which White must find all the correct bishop moves to save himself.

In the 1970s, Benko composed a few excellent studies, but it was not until the 1980s that he totally immersed himself in them, reinventing himself as an endgame study composer. Sometimes he resurrected

old ideas. I find the following study extremely impressive.



Pal Benko

1st Prize Magyar Sakkélet 1980  
 White to play and win

The principle of what should happen in this position is clear: White is going to sacrifice his rook on a1, because in normal endgames he has no chance of winning. The rook sac in the corner has been known since Polerio in 1590! Benko has added a number of interesting elements.

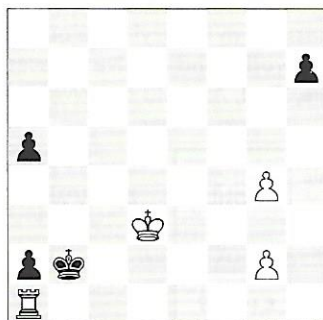
1.g4! With this pawn move, White creates space on the kingside.

1...♖b2 2.♖f2+! The start of a subtle tempo game.

2...♖b3 The king must not go to the bottom rank: 2...♖b1 3.♖c3! a1♖+ 4.♖b3, and wins.

3.♖f6! A highly surprising rook move. White forces the backward a-pawn to advance in order to get the tempos right.

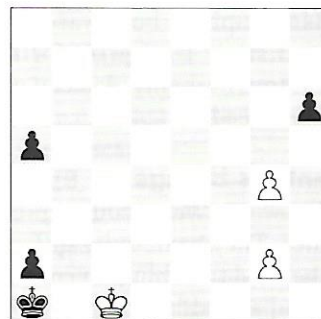
3...a5 4.♖f1 ♖b2 5.♖a1! Finally it's time for Polerio's rook sacrifice.



5...h6 Black does not have to take the rook at once. After 5...♖xa1 White would win as follows: 6.♖c2 h6 7.♖c1 h5 (or 7...a4 8.♖c2 a3 9.g3 h5 10.g5,

and wins) 8.g5! h4 9.g6 h3 10.gxh3 a4 11.g7 a3 12.♖d2! ♖b2 13.g8♖ a1♖ 14.♖g7+ ♖a2 15.♖f7+ ♖b1 16.♖f5+ ♖a2 17.♖d5+ ♖b2 18.♖d4+ ♖b1 19.♖d3+ ♖a2 20.♖c4+, and mate on the next move.

6.♖d2 ♖xa1 7.♖c1! The correct king move. After 7.♖c2? a4 8.g3 a3 9.♖c1 h5 stalemate would have been unavoidable.



7...a4 Advancing the h-pawn won't help Black either. The variation goes as follows: 7...h5 8.g5 h4 9.g6 h3 10.gxh3 a4 11.g7 a3 12.♖d2 ♖b2 13.g8♖ a1♖ 14.♖g7+ ♖a2 15.♖f7+ ♖b1 16.♖f5+ ♖a2 17.♖d5+ ♖b2 18.♖d4+ ♖b1 19.♖d3+ ♖a2 20.♖c4+ ♖b2 21.♖c2 mate.

8.♖c2 a3 9.g3 h5 10.g5 h4 11.g6 h3 12.g7 h2 13.g8♖ h1♖ 14.♖g7

Mate.

During the 1982 Interzonal tournament in Las Palmas, I showed Benko one of my own studies. It was an aristocratic study, which means that there were no pawns on the board. Benko was impressed and asked me if I would consider entering it for the annual endgame study tournament of *Chess Life & Review*. I had no objection, of course. Later, another chess player relayed a request from Benko to me: would I allow him to rotate the study to the effect that the black king would end up on its starting square? This is the nice thing about aristocratic studies, of course: in the absence of pawns, the starting position can be rotated. I had no objection against this either, thinking



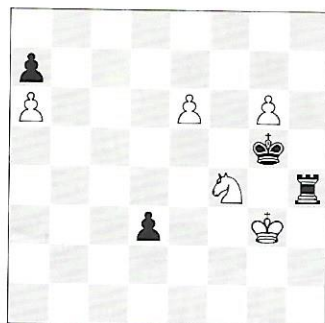
what a perfectionist Benko was: tinkering with studies was his passion.

My study won second prize, Benko having rated a study by Attila Koranyi slightly higher. Afterwards, two problems emerged. I had published my study in the original set-up – without rotation – and, more importantly, Koranyi's study was found to be incorrect. So what did Benko do? He did not strip Koranyi of his first prize, but awarded my original study first prize for next year's tournament. A very nice gesture indeed!

### Relentless braggers

Benko was a year younger than Donner. They were quite different, but they had two things in common: both had a predilection for sarcasm and were relentless braggers. During the Team World Championship in Lucerne 1989, I showed Benko more studies. He observed that I was now in third place amongst the GMs occupied with endgame studies. This classification turned out to be immutable, because he considered Richard Réti the perennial number two. And, 'Of course I'm the best', he added with a characteristic sarcastic little laugh. I like people who don't suffer from false modesty, but better than

Réti? They're probably fairly evenly matched. Both Réti and Benko have composed magnificent studies, often from a natural starting position – as if it could have been an actual game position. This goes for the next study as well.



Pal Benko

1st Prize Magyar Sakkélet 1991  
White to play and win

The starting move is obvious.

**1.g7 ♖g4+ 2.♔f3!**

White must continue to attack the rook. 2...♔f2? would be met simply by 2...♔f6, and Black stops both pawns.

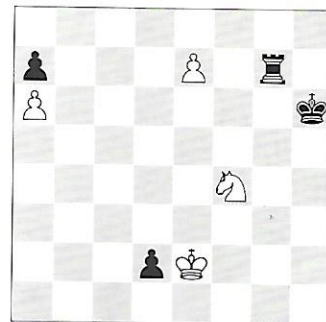
**2...♔h6**

Black is aiming for stalemate. After 2...♔f6 3.♔xg4 d2 4.g8♖ d1♖+ 5.♔g3 he would quietly go under. He would quickly run out of checks.

**3.e7!** The only way to win. After 3.♔xg4? d2 4.g8♖ d1♖+ 5.♔h4

♖h5+! a stalemate would be unavoidable: 6.♔g3 ♖f3+!, and in the end White would have to take the queen.

**3...d2 4.♔e2 ♖xg7**



**5.♔g6!**

Again, White needed to be on the alert for stalemate: 5.e8♖? ♖e7+! 6.♖xe7 d1♖+, and White is again forced to capture the queen.

The minor promotion 5.e8♖ would be insufficient for the win as well, since White is forced to swap rooks after 5...♖d7 6.♔d1 ♖d6 to prevent losing his a-pawn. The final result is a theoretically drawn endgame. A possible continuation would be 7.♖e6+ ♖xe6 8.♔xe6 ♔g6 9.♔d4 ♔f6 10.♔c6 ♔e6 11.♔xa7 ♔d7 12.♔b5 ♔c6 13.♔xd2 ♔b6, and White is forced to advance his a-pawn, after which the black king will be safe in the corner.

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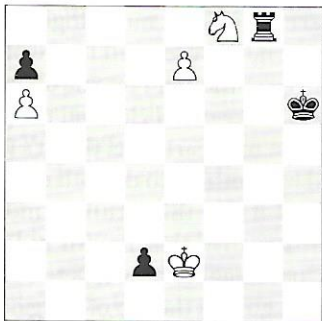
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## On the back of his business card was the notation of his win against Fischer 40 years ago.

...g8 6. f8 Blocking the rook. Kings are looking hopeless for Black, but he still has one resource.



...g5! An ingenious defence. ...g6! In endgame study jargon, this is 'witchback'. The knight returns to its post. The second knight sacrifice is necessary to avoid stalemate. After 7.e8? 5+ 8. xxe5 d1+ 9. xd1 the stalemate would look slightly different, while a rook promotion would lead to the variation given above.

...d5 8. d1 And White wins. A strong and elegant study in all its simplicity.

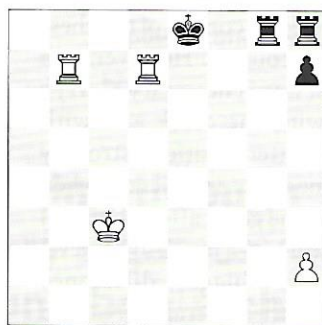
### Hot-headed

In 2002, a reunion was organized in Vila Rica, four decades after the Candidates tournament. Kortchnoi and Benko were there and were to give a simultaneous display, and Kortchnoi was also going to play in the annual open tournament. Benko had declined, arguing that it would be too tiring. I met him on the street in Willemstad. I had had a close encounter with some barbed wire somewhere, so my shirt was slightly torn. 'Is this your best shirt?' he asked me after we had shaken hands – again with that characteristic little laugh. He gave me his business card. On the back of it was the notation of his win against Fischer 40 years ago. He must have been inordinately proud of it; in fact, you could say that that game was his business card.

Kortchnoi and Benko's opponents in the simul were fairly weak, and it started to look like a walk-over. The organization asked me to give the amateurs a bit of a hand, and I devised an ingenious rescue plan for one of Benko's opponents. When Benko came to the board and saw the subtle saving move, he snapped at me irascibly, 'You shouldn't interfere with the games.' He could not appreciate this study-like discovery of mine, and he had every reason not to, of course. I recognized his hot-headedness, and realized how this would have contributed to his tussle with Fischer 40 years ago (when in an angry dispute he hit his young compatriot, an act he very much regretted afterwards, as he already knew of Fischer's mental problems – ed.). I managed to pour oil on the waters by assuring him that I had acted on the orders of the organization.

### Last big study

Benko composed his last big study in 2000, when he was already in his 70s.



Pal Benko

1st Prize Magyar Sakkélet 2000  
White to play and win

In this double-rook endgame, the white rooks are positioned threateningly on the seventh rank. Black's king, however, still has castling rights, provided it is no longer blocked by

the rook on g8. This means that White must prevent that rook from checking his king; otherwise Black will save the day by castling.

### 1. d2!

The only winning rook move. White protects the second rank, where his king will have to find a safe refuge.

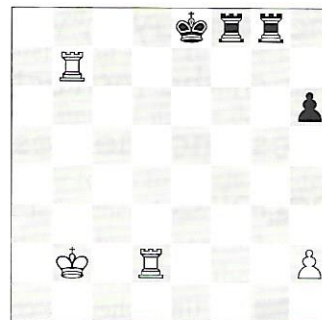
### 1... f8 Threatening check on f3.

2. c2! It's becoming a subtle tempo game. After 2. b2? h8 3. h3 h6! 4. h4 h5 a situation of mutual zugzwang would have arisen. After 5. a2 Black saves himself with 5... f6, e.g. 6. c2 a6+ 7. b2 a8, and Black escapes.

2... h8 Black must abandon his castling rights. But White must continue to play accurately.

3. b2 Slowly and systematically, White now moves his troops to the left.

### 3... h6



4. h3! Again, mutual zugzwang is at issue. After 4. h4? h5 White would be unable to win.

4... h5 5. h4 Now Black finds himself in a lethal zugzwang situation.

5... h8 Sad necessity. 5... f6 would run into 6. c2, and Black loses a rook: 6... d6 7. c8+ d8 8. xd8+ cxd8 9. b8+, and wins.

6. a2 h8 7. a7 This rook, too, moves to the left.

### 7... h8 8. b2

The tour de force has been completed. Black will be mated. A striking characteristic of Benko's studies is that they don't feature much capturing of pieces. This study is all about manoeuvring and subtle little moves. ■