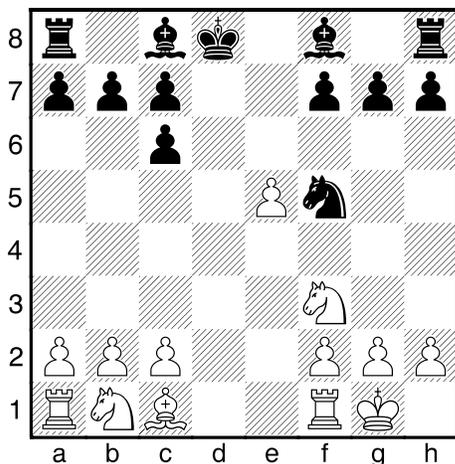


Ruy Lopez Berlin [C67]
Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (2767)
Alexander Grischuk (2777)

FIDE Candidates Tournament (4.3),
21.03.2020

The game of the day today is maybe the most exciting game we have had in the tournament up to this point. Even on a day with four draws, there is plenty of entertainment and exciting chess.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.0-0 Nxe4 5.d4 Nd6 6.Bxc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 Nf5 8.Qxd8+ Kxd8 [



The Berlin Wall endgame. I still remember Jonathan Rowson's stern opinion, written not

long before the 2000 Kasparov-Kramnik World Championship match in London:

"Miles has been playing this system for decades with an intimidating success rate. It was no surprise that he should wheel it out against me in the context of a two game match because Black has excellent winning chances if White plays inaccurately but retains fair drawing chances even if White plays very well. That said, I had heard Mickey Adams comment that "strong players always win this ending as White" and it has recently become fairly clear how White should set about playing this ending."

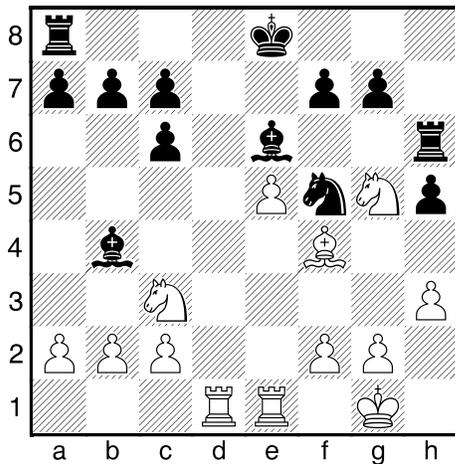
These days the Berlin is one of the main openings in chess and there have been top tournaments where almost all of the games were the Berlin - and drawn. Especially towards the end of the season, where the same players meet each other for the 5th time or so in the season and have had no time to find ideas of significant. Lately many have of course decided to opt for the pleasing move 3.Bc4, which leads to entirely different challenges.

I have always had the opinion of the Berlin that the doubled pawn is not a great liability for Black. Yes, White has an extra pawn on the kingside, but in return Black has the solid influence on the light squares. The real

problem for Black is his lack of development and the fact that it is difficult to get the rooks into the game. White needs to create problems with active play in order to topple the black position. Often with the pawn sacrifice e5–e6.

The way MVL played in this game matched this philosophy perfectly.]

9.h3 Ke8 10.Nc3 h5 11.Bf4 Be7 12.Rad1 Be6 13.Ng5 Rh6 14.Rfe1 Bb4



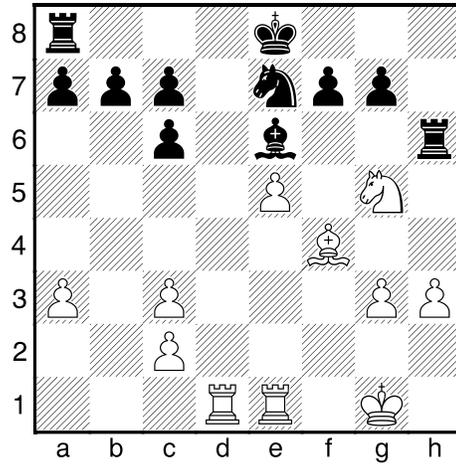
15.a3!

This is the modern approach. The queenside does not matter. But getting rid of an annoying pin is very important. This is also the way Kramnik played in his attempt to overrun Karjakin in the 2018 Candidates.

15...Bxc3 16.bxc3 h4 17.g4

17.Kh2 Kf8 18.Rb1 (18.g4 hxg3+ 19.fxg3 Ne7 20.h4 Re8=) 18...b6 19.Rb4 Re8 20.Ra4 a5 went absolutely nowhere in Nepomniachtchi – Grischuk, in round 2.

17...hxg3 18.fxg3 Ne7



Grischuk is a psychopath. He spent 53 minutes on this move, entirely convinced that MVL would reply 19.g4. But as Grischuk himself pointed out. If he had not wasted the time here, he would have just wasted it later...]

19.h4!N

The first new move. It looks highly counterintuitive to weaken the light squares and I guess this is why MVL previously played the more natural 19.g4, but after 19...Nd5 20.Bd2 Nb6 Black was already very comfortable in Vachier Lagrave – Nakamura, Internet 2018.

19...Nd5 20.Bc1!

White keeps the strong bishop and does not care about material too much.

20...Nxc3!

Grischuk decides to accept the pawn sacrifice.

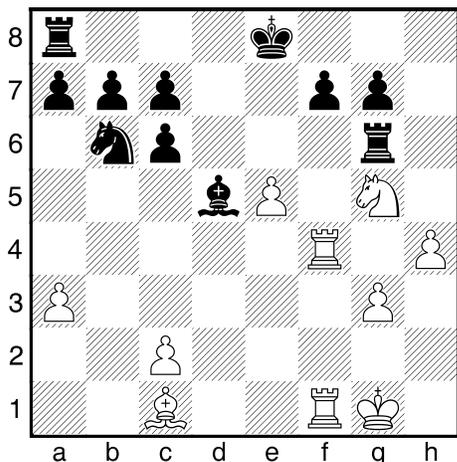
The alternative of trying a blockade on the light squares is not going to work, as far as I can see:

20...b5? 21.Ne4 Rh8 22.c4! bxc4 23.Rd4 Nb6 24.Nc5 Rd8 25.Nxe6 fxe6 26.Rxd8+ Kxd8 27.g4± Although Black is a pawn up, he is in real danger. The knight is passive. Even on d5 it has literally no function, as this impressive square leads to nowhere of importance.

21.Rd3 Na4 22.Rf3 Bd5

A possible improvement for Black would be 22...Ke7 23.Nxe6 Rxe6 24.Bg5+ Kf8 25.Ref1 Kg8 26.Rxf7 Rc8 27.R1f5± , where he is definitely under pressure. Is the Berlin itself becoming a bit suspicious? It would be great if it was the case.

23.Rf4 Nb6 24.Ref1 Rg6



25.Rf5

Here MVL had an alternative idea that was very interesting. 25.R4f2! The key idea is to

play h5 and Nxf7. 25...Nc4 26.Rf5 (26.h5!? Rxf5 27.Bxf5 Nxa3 28.Bd2 a5 (28...Nc4 is met with the brilliant 29.e6!! Bxe6 30.Bc3 Kf8 31.Re1 Bd5 32.g4± , where Black is very passive and White can improve his position without difficulties.) 29.e6 Bxe6 30.g4 Nxc2 31.g5 Nd4 Black is no worse.) 26...Kf8 27.g4 (27.a4 Kg8 28.h5 Rh6 29.Nxf7 Re6 is fine for Black.) 27...Kg8 28.h5 Rxf5 29.Bxf5 Re8! (29...Nxa3? 30.h6! gxh6 31.Bf6 Kh7 32.Rh5 gives White a winning attack. He is both threatening g4-g5 and Rf2-h2.) 30.Bc1± This endgame is of course a draw with accurate defence for Black, but White can still push a little bit.

25...Bc4 26.Re1

26.Rd1 is the other idea, but after 26...c5 27.h5 Rc6 28.g4 Ke7 29.Rf2 Re8 Black looks fairly solid.

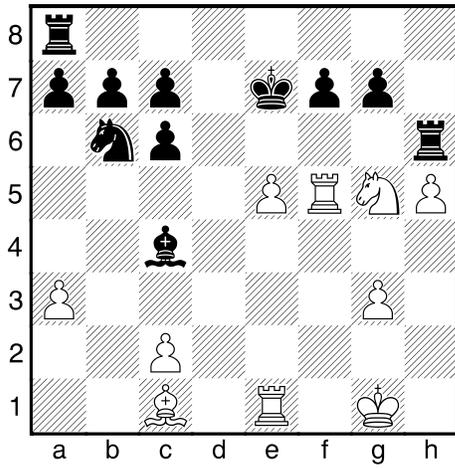
26...Ke7?!

26...Rd8! was safer. Black can neutralise the white pressure eventually. 27.Kh2 Rd7 28.Ne4 (or 28.h5 Rh6 29.g4 Be6 30.Rf4 c5 with close to equality.) 28...Kf8 29.Nc5 Re7 30.h5 Rf6! 31.g4 Rxf5 32.gxf5 Nd7 33.Nxd7+ Rxd7 and Black will make the draw.

27.h5

It is possible that 27.g4! Be6 28.Rf2± was stronger.

27...Rh6?

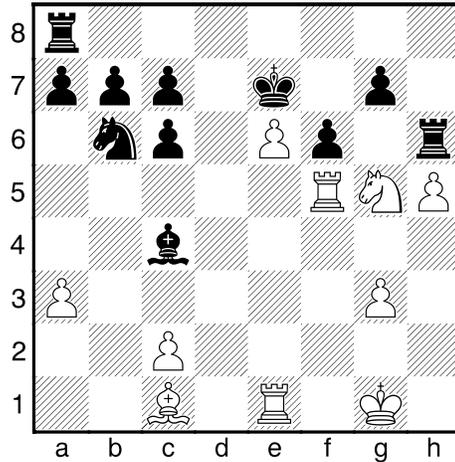


After this natural move, Black is finally in real danger.

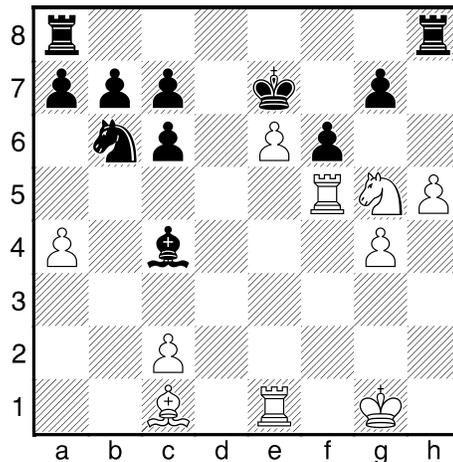
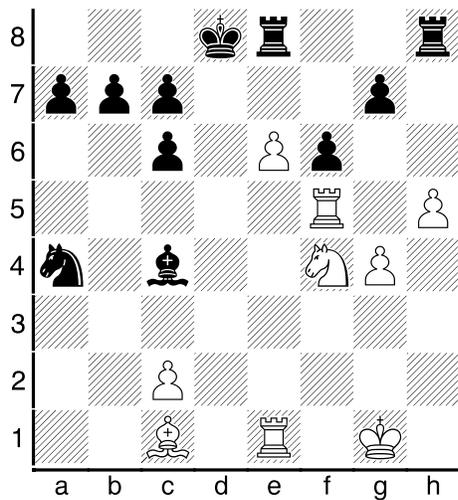
Better is 27...Be6! 28.Rf2 Rh6 29.g4 Nc4! 30.Nxf7 (30.Ne4 Rbh8=) 30...Bxf7 31.Bg5+ Ke6 32.Bxh6 gxh6 33.Rf6+ Ke7 34.Rxh6 Rg8 35.Kf2 Rxg4 36.Rh7 Ke6 37.Rh6+ Ke7 38.Rh7.

28.g4?!

MVL misses his first chance to display great creativity. The thematic 28.e6! was possible. Black has to play 28...f6: (28...Bxe6? 29.Rxf7+ would be a disaster.)



Here White has a fantastic move. Having achieved a great concession from the opponent, he calmly defends his h5-pawn. 29.g4!! Black now has a choice. 29...Rhh8 is met with the powerful inclusion of the c1-bishop. (29...fxg5 loses brilliantly to 30.Bxg5+ Rf6 31.h6!! Nd5 32.hxg7 Rg8 33.Re4 b5 34.Rxf6 Nxf6 35.Rf4 Kxe6 36.Bxf6 would leave White very close to winning.; 29...Rg8 30.Ne4 Rbh8 31.Bb2 Nd5 32.Kf2 Kd8 33.Nd2 Ba6 34.c4 Ne7 35.Rf4 White has a very strong pressure. The game is very complicated and Black of course has an extra pawn. But White is a big favourite here.) 30.a4!! Nxa4 Black has no choice in the matter. But at least now he has ...c5 against the bishop check, so he should be fine, right? 31.Nh3! No! The knight comes round to f4, now Black no longer has ...Nd5. 31...Rae8 (31...g6 does not work. White picks up a tempo on the knight. 32.Ra5 b5 33.Nf4± Black will have to drop something. It is not the end of the game, but it is clear that Black is only barely hanging on.) 32.Nf4 Kd8



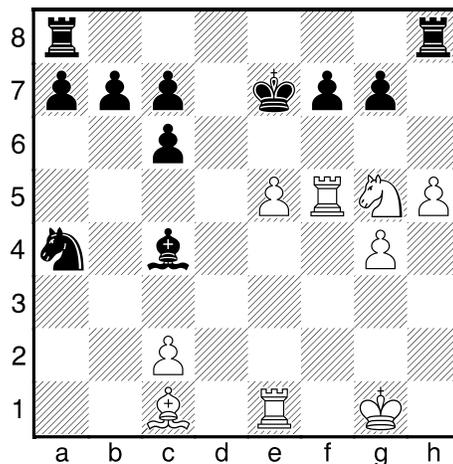
White has a lot of tempting options here. 33.e7, 33.g5 and 33.Ra5 all lead to a big advantage. Which one is the better would require more time to analyse than a daily report offers, but let us go with: 33.e7+!? Kd7 34.Ng6 Rhg8 35.g5! Bf7 36.Nf8+ Kc8 37.h6 gxh6 38.Nh7 hxg5 39.Nxf6 Rg6 40.Nxe8 Bxe8 41.Rxg5 Rxg5+ 42.Bxg5 and White is still pressing.

was another strong version of the idea. Black cannot take a piece here. 30...fxg5? (30...Nxa4 31.Nh3 with a big advantage for White is the key concept.) 31.Bxg5+ Kd6 (31...Ke8 32.Rf7) 32.Bf4+! Ke7 33.Rf7+ with a winning position. White will take on g7 and advance the pawns. Black's extra pieces are offering him no play whatsoever.

28...Rhh8?

29...Nxa4?!

Once again Grischuk should have played 28...Be6! 29.Nxe6 Rxe6 30.Bg5+ Kf8 31.Ref1 Kg8 32.Rxf7 Nd5 33.R1f5 (33.c4 Rxe5!) 33...g6 with even chances.



29.a4!?

A wonderful aggressive idea.

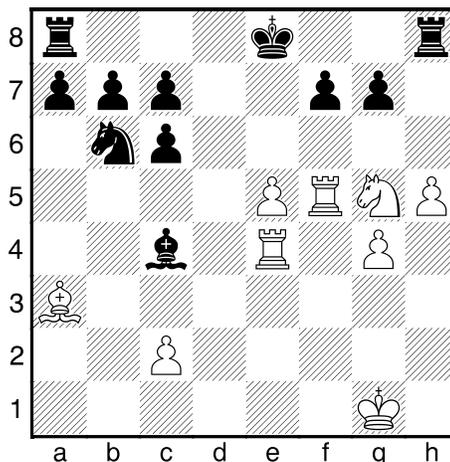
29.e6! f6 30.a4

29...Be6!? could still have been attempted, but this time White has the advantage. 30.Nxe6 Kxe6 31.Ref1! The f7-pawn cannot be saved without giving up the exchange. 31...Rhg8 32.Rxf7 Nd7 33.a5 White has an advantage, but actually, I think this is a little less than in the line with 29.e6!.

After the game MVL agreed to being disappointed with not winning the game, but also that he did not know where he had missed his chances. Grischuk on the other hand felt that he had had chances as well with the extra pawns.

30.Ba3+?

MVL said that he simply "forgot" about this move and the fact that Rxc4 or Rxa4 was a real threat. 30.Re4! The first point is that White is totally winning after 30...b5 31.Rxc4 bxc4 32.Rxf7 Ke8 33.Rxc7. The extra exchange matters little, compared to the activity of the white pieces. 30...g6 31.Rf6 is also not an improvement, so the critical line becomes: 30...Nb6 (In many lines Black wants to play 30...Be6, but this time White has a nice winning line. 31.Nxe6 fxe6 32.Bg5+ Ke8 33.Rf3 b5 34.Ref4 followed by Rf7. Black has to run. 34...Kd7 35.Rf7+ Kc8 36.Rxg7 White wins.) 31.Ba3+ Ke8



32.Nxf7!! where White has the beautiful winning combination 32...Bxf7 33.e6 White wins. Most beautifully after 33...Bxh5 34.Ref4!.

30...c5 31.e6

White would still have some pressure after 31.Re4 Be6 32.Nxe6 fxe6 33.Rg5 Nc3 34.Rc4 Nb5 35.Bxc5+ Kf7 36.Rf4+ Kg8 37.c4 Nc3 38.Kf2, but this is of course a far cry from the chance he had just missed.

31...f6 32.Bxc5+ Nxc5 33.Rxc5 fxg5?!

An easier draw appears after 33...b5! 34.Rxc7+ Kd6 35.Rd7+ Kc6 36.Nf3 Bxe6 37.Rxg7 Bd5 and Black is fine.

34.Rxc7+ Kd6 35.Rxc4 a5!? 36.Rd1+

MVL could have tried a bit more with 36.Rd4+ Kc6 37.Rd7 a4 38.Rxg7 a3 39.Kf2 a2 40.Ra1 Kd6 41.Ke3±, but I am sure he knew he had missed his chance to take the sole lead.

**36...Ke7 37.Re4 Rhd8 38.Rb1 Rdb8 39.Rb5
a4 40.Rxg5 Rg8 41.h6 gxh6 42.Rxg8 Rxg8
43.Rxa4 h5 44.Kf2 Rxg4 45.Rxg4 hxg4
46.Kg3 Kxe6 47.Kxg4 Ke5 48.Kf3 Kd4
49.Ke2 Kc3 50.Kd1 b5 51.Kc1 b4 52.Kb1
b3 53.cxb3 Kxb3 1/2-1/2**

What did we learn from this game? First of all, Grischuk is incorrigible. Some people think it is cool or entertaining. I just find it stupid. The most intelligent person in the room showing no intelligence. It really is awful to watch.

The Berlin is not as safe as it has been

considered for a while. Black can defend, but he certainly has to.

MVL is an unlikely winner of the tournament. You do not get too many chances at this level and if you lack the feeling for when you get them, you won't make it. The freebie against Ding Liren still puts MVL in a shared lead, but it is highly likely that he will also run into trouble at some point in the tournament, so in order to win the big prize, you just cannot let chances like this slide.