

Learn from the Legends

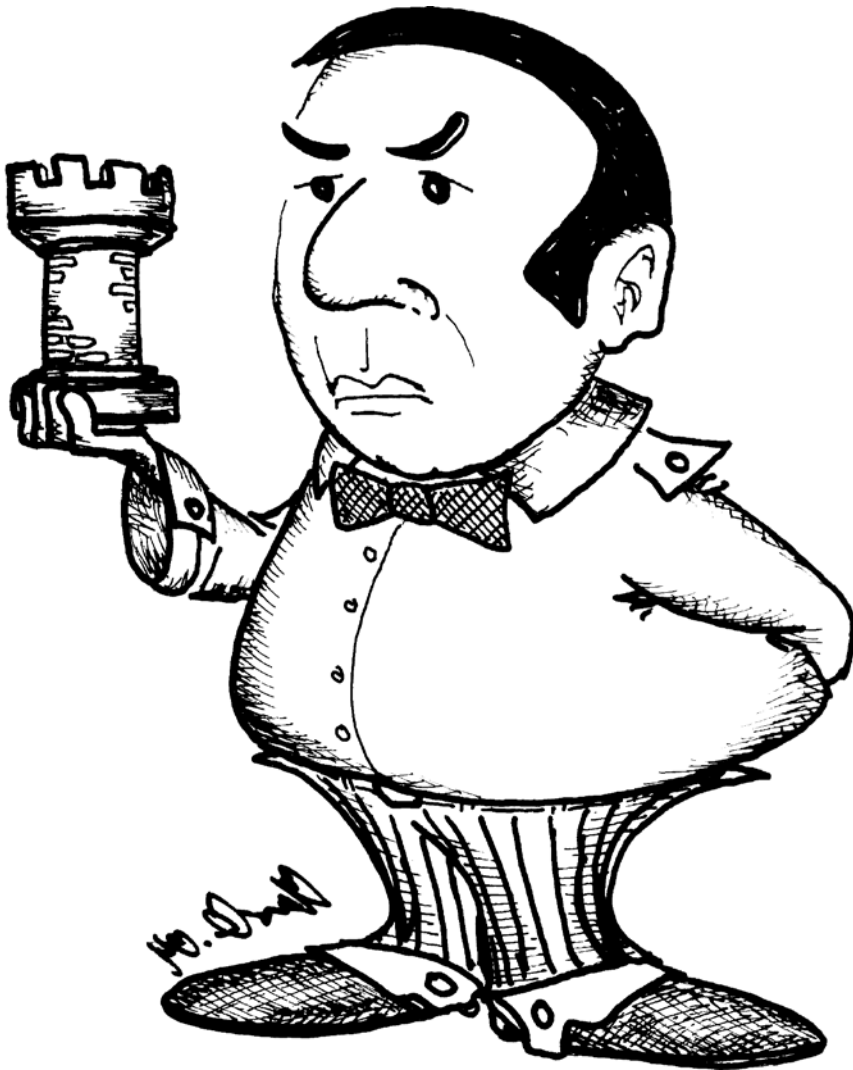
Chess Champions at their Best

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Akiba Rubinstein's Rook Endings



When, at the age of 18, it became clear that I had no other choice but to join the glorious Romanian army, some older friends warned me that the main thing I had to avoid was dying of boredom.

As a future student of the Polytechnic Institute I had been assigned to a technical division, which meant that I would spend most of the daytime in a classroom where nothing special was going to happen. (Indeed, most of my colleagues-in-arms used this time to sleep, with their heads on the tables. A few others would chat in low voices while even fewer would write letters to their beloved young ladies).

Following my friends' advice, I decided that I would spend the time available learning the Russian language; even then I already had a good collection of Soviet chess books, but could not take full advantage of it, since the linguistic barrier was rather difficult to overcome. I took with me a pocket dictionary and a carefully selected book (the criteria were: it had to be not too thick, in order to be easy to carry and hide; to be printed in hard cover in order to survive possible accidents; finally, it could not be one of the best books in my library, to avoid endless regrets in case of deterioration, loss, or confiscation by one of my superiors).

The main plan ended in total success: nine months later when, much to my relief, I became a civilian again, I felt able to read and understand most of my Russian chess books. And yet, there was something that I had not foreseen: the "carefully selected book" which I had carried so many times from the dormitory to the classroom and back, hidden under the military robe, very close to my heart, had become my chess Bible. A book I would open again and again to see for the *n*th time one game or another.

Some time ago, wishing to remember the good old days, I opened again that book: *Akiba Rubinstein*, written by Razuvaev and Murakhvery, and containing a biography and selected games of my classic idol. I was immediately struck by the same old feelings, but I also became curious: would the book stand up to the analysis of a more mature and critical eye?

Much to my disappointment, it did not. I discovered that Razuvaev's analysis contained countless mistakes or omissions and very little original work. But when I admitted this as a fact, I realized it had nothing to do with Rubinstein's games: they provided me with the same feeling of clarity, fluency and logic as 20 years ago.

I took it as my duty to publish my own commentaries on some of his games, and the obvious theme was his rook endgames: a great Akiba specialty.

However, this is a book dedicated mainly to World Champions. Therefore, the reader might wonder why it opens with a chapter about the games of a player who did not even play a match for the supreme title? I shall try to explain that there is more to my decision than subjective memories.

Until Alekhine's death in 1946, the World Champion had the personal right to choose his challenger for the title.

Was Akiba ever the best player?

Akiba reached his peak of form in the years preceding the First World War. In 1909 he obtained one of his best results ever, sharing first place with Lasker in St Petersburg, $3\frac{1}{2}$ points ahead of the field. This was the moment when public opinion started considering Rubinstein as the most likely challenger for the title.

However, his magical year was 1912, when he won every single strong tournament he played in. These were long tournaments, with about 20 rounds to be played. Therefore, proving such absolute superiority was far from easy and, in fact, had no precedent since Morphy. Akiba's performance should be put at the same level as Kasparov's domination in the tournaments played around the turn of the millennium.

Much to Akiba's misfortune, the reigning champion in the pre-war years was Emanuel Lasker. Besides being a very strong player, Lasker knew how to take full advantage of the right to choose his opponent.

For instance, he practically forced Schlechter to play a match under scandalously unfair conditions (although it should be mentioned that even so he only retained his title with luck). Little wonder that he reigned for more than a quarter of a century.

Although there is not much historical evidence about it, we can suppose that Lasker also did his best to delay the seemingly inevitable match against Akiba. After long negotiations, the match was scheduled for October 1914 but then the war came and chess life was practically frozen. Akiba's nerves seem to have been seriously affected by the conflagration and, although he remained a fearsome opponent until his last important tournament (Prague Olympiad 1931), he was never the same player again. As a consequence he ceased to be, according to public opinion, a plausible challenger.

However, since during one specific period Akiba was clearly the strongest player in the world, I feel entitled to include his masterpieces in this book.

Rubinstein's name is closely linked with the main lines of such openings as the Nimzo-Indian, the Queen's Indian and the Tarrasch Defence. He invented several set-ups for Black that are still topical in the French Defence and the Ruy Lopez. He was also the first to play the modern Meran variation of the Semi-Slav defence.

Opening expert or endgame virtuoso?

Why is it then that I have focused on the endgames played by such a great opening expert?

Rubinstein was probably the first great player to use the so-called long plans, lasting through the whole game, from the opening till the endgame. His opponents didn't always understand Akiba's monumental play and were only concerned with parrying the immediate threats. Only after the game was over, did it become clear that Rubinstein had planned the contours of the ensuing endgame from a very early stage.

You will notice that more than once I have started analysing a game at an earlier moment than the endgame itself. There is also a complete game in this chapter. The reason for doing this is to illustrate the idea of the "long plan".

I have divided the material in accordance with the number of rooks present on board. As will soon become evident, this is more than a formal classification. Pure rook endings (one rook each) tend to be rather technical. Four-rook positions present far more tactical possibilities, although naturally they can also transpose to a pure rook ending.

Rook endgames are not only the most common in practice, but also the most difficult to analyse. The rook is such a strong and mobile piece that it allows countless tactical possibilities and makes over-the-board calculation especially difficult. I have tried to point out in my annotations the moment when one of the players missed a win or a draw, but the probability of mistakes in my comments is quite great, precisely because of these difficulties.

Rook endgames are well known for their drawish tendency. A material advantage of one or, in some extreme cases, two pawns is frequently difficult or even impossible to convert into a win. This does not really mean that Tartakower's axiom "all rook endings are drawn" should be taken literally, however. The technical purpose of this chapter is to highlight those elements that mark a clear advantage for one of the players, with an elevated probability of resulting in a win. (I made the specification "technical" because another purpose, this time of a sentimental nature, is to pay tribute to Akiba).

After a thorough study of Rubinstein's games, I have developed a rough method for preliminary evaluation of rook endings. For each favourable element such as an extra pawn, spatial advantage, the more active rook or an important weakness in the enemy camp, one point is awarded. If the difference between the two sides is one point (scores such as 1–0, or 2–1) the position is clearly better but not necessarily winning. This marks a significant difference compared with pawn, same-colour bishop, or knight endgames where the score 1–0 (equivalent to an extra pawn) is usually sufficient for a win.

With the exception of some extreme cases (for instance, the ending with f- and h-pawns) a score of 2–0 or 3–1 should guarantee a win.

The reader should understand that this system is only a guideline. It can help the practical player (and definitely helped me throughout the years) to choose one or another ending when simplifying from the middlegame, but should not be treated as an infallible rule. Some concrete advantage might weight much more than just one point, or on the contrary, have no real significance. We should take into account that a greater number of pawns present on the board would usually increase the winning chances, while a simplified position would normally help the defending side. This is an element that cannot be easily quantified. Besides, if chess were pure mathematics, it would be much less interesting.

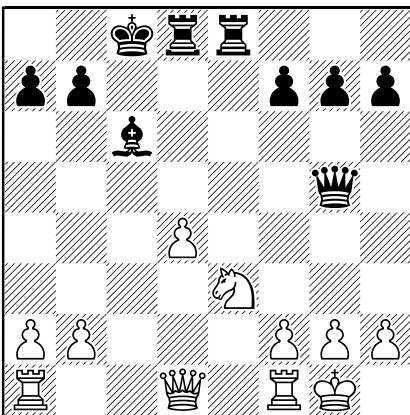
At the same time, if a rook ending is winning it does not necessarily mean that the player with an advantage will automatically win it. We shall see from the selected examples that good, sometimes even intricate, technique is needed.

We shall make a further division between the situations where the stronger side has a material advantage and those where the superiority is only of a positional nature.

Converting a material advantage I

Akiba Rubinstein – Emanuel Lasker

St Petersburg 1909



An ideal situation for the stronger side is to have a minimal material advantage and some other kind of positional advantage. This is a specific example of the score 2–0.

Lasker had sacrificed (or rather lost) a pawn in the opening, but his position looks rather active. In view of the threat ...♖xe3, it would seem that he would have no problem regaining his pawn. Unless...

16.♖c1!

Akiba simply continues his development, cutting off most of the black attack's energy.

16...♗xe3

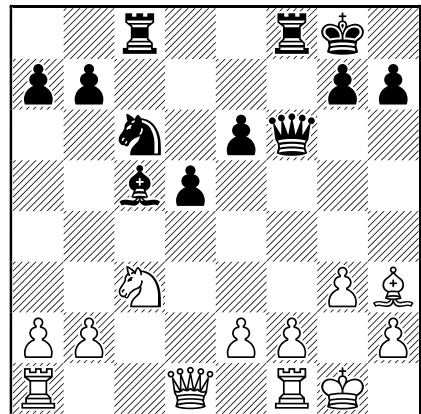
The prophylactic 16...♖b8 would give White an important tempo to develop his initiative: 17.♖c5 ♗f4 18.d5 ♖xe3 19.♖c1! Just like in the game, this elegant move puts an end to Black's hopes for counterplay. 19...♗e4 20.dxc6 bxc6 21.♖c3 with a clear advantage for White, according to Lasker.

17.♖xc6† bxc6 18.♖c1!

It is worth mentioning that with the same intermediate move Rubinstein would later defeat another (this time, future) World Champion:

Akiba Rubinstein – Jose Capablanca

San Sebastian 1911



Black has built up strong pressure against the f2-pawn. In case of the timid 15.e3 he would consolidate his centre with 15...♗ad8, obtaining a perfectly viable position. Noticing the slightly hanging position of the black bishop and the

c8-rook, Rubinstein initiated a thematic tactical operation.

15. ♖xd5!? ♜h6?

Capablanca tries to solve by simple means a position that is basically quite complicated.

Obviously, 15...exd5? loses material to 16. ♗xd5† ♕h8 17. ♙xc8.

Recently, a Russian amateur chess player named Sorokhtin discovered that 15...♙xf2† would have allowed Black to stay in the game, for instance 16. ♕g2 ♖e5!. This is Sorokhtin's improvement over the variation 16...♗f7? 17. ♖f4 given by Kasparov. For instance 17. ♖xf2 ♖xf2† 18. ♕xf2 ♖d8 19. ♖e7† ♕h8 20. ♖b3 ♖xe7 21. ♗xe6 ♖d4† 22. ♕g2 ♖d5 when the weakness of the white kingside as well as better piece coordination offers Black a reasonable game.

16. ♕g2 ♖cd8

This was the move Capa relied on. 16...♙xf2 would be less efficient now because of 17. ♖f4 for instance 17...♖cd8 18. ♖a4 when White will win the e6-pawn.

17. ♗c1!

An elegant multi-purpose move. The queen escapes the unpleasant pin along the d-file, attacking the c5-bishop at the same time. By offering to be exchanged for the black queen, it also undermines the e6-square, making 17...♖xd5 impossible.

17...exd5

Black would lose quickly after 17...♗xc1? 18. ♙xe6† ♕h8 19. ♖axc1, or 17...♖xd5? 18. ♗xh6 gxh6 19. ♙xe6† with a huge material advantage for White in both cases.

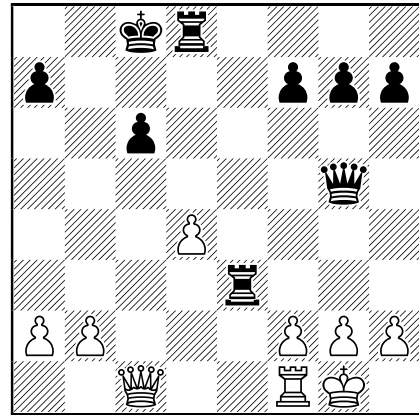
18. ♗xc5 ♖d2 19. ♖b5 ♖d4 20. ♖d3 ♖xd3 21. exd3

with a safe pawn up for White, who went on to win the game.

1–0



Let us now return to Rubinstein – Lasker.
(Position after 18. ♗c1)



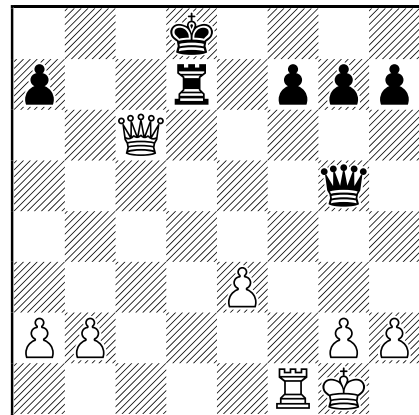
18...♖xd4

18...♖e5 19. ♗xc6† ♕b8 20. dxe5 ♗xe5 21. ♖c1 also looks winning for White due to Black's weakened king's position.

19. ♖xe3 ♖d7

19...♖d6 20. ♖xf7

20. ♗xc6† ♕d8



21. ♖f4!

“A remarkable concept. White threatens to decide the game with a direct attack against the king: 22. ♗a8† ♕e7 (22...♕c7 23. ♖c4†! also looks bad) 23. ♖e4†. In order to avoid this, Black has to exchange queens, entering a lost endgame.” (Lasker). By means of this remarkable rook lift, White defends the e3-pawn and gains access to the e-line and to the queenside.

21...f5

Relatively best. Black takes the e4-square under control. He would lose after 21...♖a5 22.♖a8† ♕e7 23.♞e4† ♕f6 24.♖c6† ♕g5 25.h4†. The counterattack 21...♞d1† 22.♕f2 ♞d2† 23.♕e1 ♖xg2 would fail to 24.♞d4†! (overloading the rook) 24...♕e7 25.♖d6† and White wins. Both lines were indicated by Lasker.

22.♖c5 ♖e7

Now, 22...♞d1† 23.♕f2 ♞d2† 24.♕e1 ♖xg2 would simply lose the rook to 25.♖a5†.

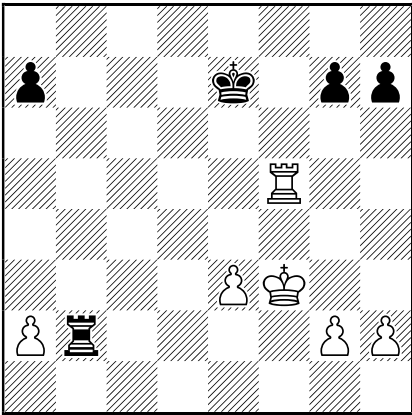
23.♖xe7†

Actually Fritz considers 23.♖c3 to be equally strong, but that move would lead us to the next chapter.

23...♕xe7 24.♞xf5 ♞d1† 25.♕f2

Too passive would have been 25.♞f1 ♞d2 26.♞b1 ♞e2 with drawing chances for Black.

25...♞d2† 26.♕f3 ♞xb2



27.♞a5! ♞b7

An important moment. Besides his extra pawn, White has the more active rook. Black has nothing to compensate for White's trumps. Therefore, we can safely attach to the position the score of 2-0. White's win will require some accuracy but will never be put in any doubt.

28.♞a6

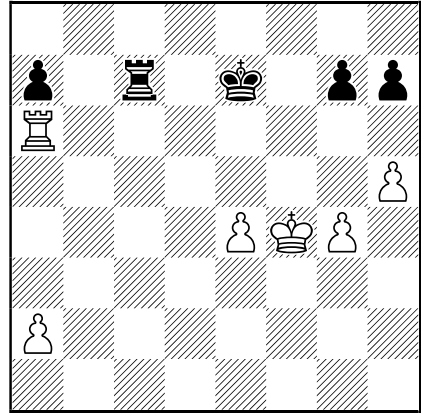
A typical method in rook endings. With the last two moves, White has restricted both Black pieces' activity. In principle, if everything else failed, White could at some moment push his

a-pawn to a6 and then transfer the rook to b7. This is, however, not necessary for the moment: White should first strengthen his position on the other side. The only thing left for the World Champion was to wait for the execution.

28...♕f8 29.e4 ♞c7 30.h4 ♕f7 31.g4 ♕f8 32.♕f4

The attack on the kingside is massive. There would be little sense in keeping one of the pawns back, since it could be attacked at a later time. White is not in any hurry, since Black has only waiting moves at his disposal.

32...♕e7 33.h5



33...h6

This move weakens the g6-square, but letting White advance all his pawns to the fifth rank was also a bit scary. In his old endgame book Lisitzin gives a nice winning method (I am sure it is not the only one): 33...♕f7 34.♕f5 ♕e7 35.g5 ♕f7 36.e5 ♕e7 37.g6 h6 38.♞e6† now Black faces a difficult choice:

a) 38...♕d7 would allow the incredible 39.♞f6!!.. A remarkable example of how a space advantage in an apparently blocked position can allow tactical solutions based on modification of the pawn structure. It happens all the time in modern lines of the King's Indian. 39...♕e8 (After 39...gxf6 40.g7 ♞c8 41.exf6 Black cannot stop the pawns, since the king cannot cross the eighth rank.) 40.♞f7 ♞xf7† 41.gxf7† ♕xf7 42.e6† and White will stalemate the black king,

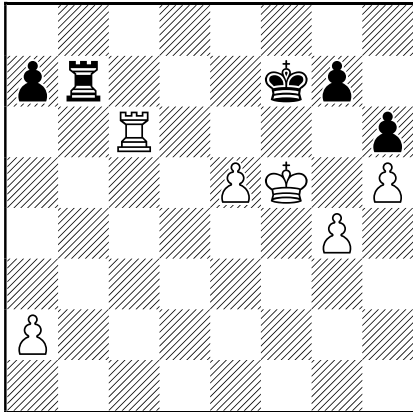
forcing g7-g5, hxc6 and mate within two moves. For instance, 42...♙e8 43.♙e5 ♔e7 44.♙d5 ♙e8 45.♙d6 ♙d8 46.e7† ♙e8 47.♙e6 a5 48.a4 g5 49.hxc6 h5 50.g7 h4 51.g8♚ mate.

b) 38...♙f8 39.♞d6 ♙e7 40.♞a6 ♞b7 (If 40...♙d7 then 41.♞f6 is again winning or 40...♙f8 41.♙e6 ♙e8 42.a4, planning a5, ♞d6, a6, when Black is too passive to resist) 41.♞c6 ♞d7 42.♞c8 once the rook captures the g7-pawn the game will be over.

34.♙f5 ♙f7 35.e5 ♞b7 36.♞d6

The only purpose of the following moves was to reach the 38th move where the game would be adjourned.

36...♙e7 37.♞a6 ♙f7 38.♞d6 ♙f8 39.♞c6 ♙f7



40.a3

Black is in zugzwang: 40...♙f8 (40...♞e7 is well met by 41.e6† ♙g8 42.♙g6 ♞e8 43.e7 followed by ♞d6-d8 and White wins) 41.♙g6 ♞b3 42.♞c8† ♙e7 43.♞c7† ♙e6 44.♞xg7 winning.

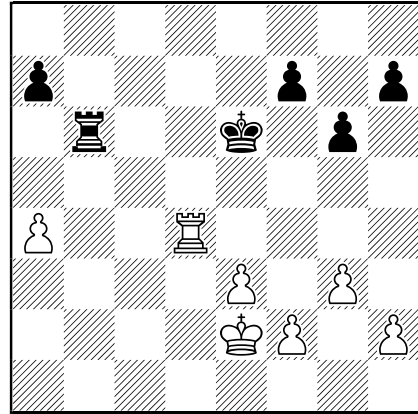
Ironically, this nice win over the World Champion didn't help Akiba's cause. Although from a formal point of view Lasker acted as a gentleman and praised his opponent's play in his annotations, he also understood that he would have a tough (if not impossible) job defending his title against such a strong player. As is known Akiba never got a title match with Lasker...

1-0

It is, however, not always possible to have an extra pawn *and* the better-placed rook. If the enemy rook is more active, then an extra pawn guarantees only practical chances, but not a clear win. Here is a typical example.

Akiba Rubinstein – Aron Nimzowitsch

Gothenburg 1920



Compared with the previous endings, it will soon be the defending side that has a more active rook. As compensation for White, there are more pawns on board and, besides, within just a few moves Rubinstein will obtain a very favourable configuration on the kingside. Therefore, a preliminary evaluation, based on the score 2-1, suggests that the position should be placed somewhere on the edge between a draw and a win for White. The further course of the game will support this evaluation. Faced with Rubinstein's strong and consequent play, Nimzowitsch will make just one significant mistake, but this will be enough for the balance to swing decisively in White's favour.

32.g4

In principle, Black would like to play ...h5, in order to defend his pawns more easily. Only the f7-pawn would need permanent care from the king, but this pawn is close enough to the centre to avoid the black monarch's decentralization.

After 32.g4, Black is at a crossroads: shall he allow g4-g5 or not? It is easy to say, already