

# **A Spanish Repertoire for Black**

by Mihail Marin

with invaluable help from

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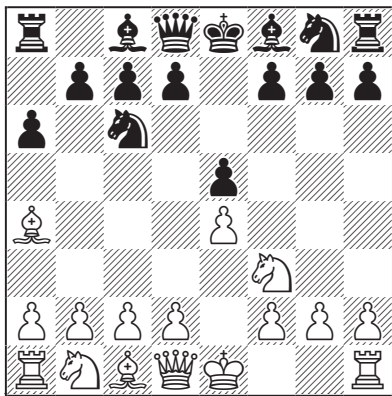
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## Chapter 1

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# The Chigorin Variation - General Aspects

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4



This is where the story of our book starts. We have just stepped into the territory of the Ruy Lopez, the handling of which is traditionally considered to be a cornerstone of positional understanding.

The next series of moves until 9.h3 has occurred in thousands of games for many decades, and is now played almost automatically in most cases. However, I will make some short comments on each move, as if it were my first time seeing the position. This will hopefully offer an overview of the significance of each chapter.

4...♗f6

Black takes advantage of the first opportunity to counterattack the enemy centre.

5.0-0

White does not need to defend his e-pawn yet, because after 5...♗xe4 6.d4 he would win the pawn back, due the vulnerability of the enemy king. Actually, this would be just the start of a completely different story titled the Open Variation, which is beyond the scope of this book.

Each move that defends the pawn has some drawbacks.

5.♗c3 blocks the c-pawn and prevents the natural plan of occupying the centre with c3 and d4.

5.♙e2 develops the queen at a moment when most of the other pieces find themselves on their initial squares. This seriously contradicts the general rules of development and is very unladylike.

5.d3 is more flexible, but might result in a loss of time if White later decides to occupy the centre with c3 and d4.

5.d4 is a premature display of central activity. The placement of the bishop on the a4-e8 diagonal serves long-term purposes, by putting the e5-pawn under pressure. If White intended to open the centre at such an early stage, he should have developed his bishop on c4, in order to get tactical threats against the f7-pawn. This would have led to a completely different opening, though.

5...♙e7

By covering the e-file, Black renews the threat of ... $\text{dxc4}$ .

### 6.♖e1

All the moves mentioned in the previous comment are possible here, too, but they would have the same drawbacks. Defending the pawn with the rook is more efficient. After the planned c3 and d4, White's major pieces would keep the central files under permanent pressure, preventing an early black counterattack.

6.♗xc6 is White's last chance to avoid the natural course of the game. After 6...dxc6 the loss of tempo is justified by the fact that Black's pieces are not optimally placed to defend the e5-pawn, which will demand some accurate play from him. However, giving up the light-squared bishop reduces White's strategic potential considerably.

### 6...b5

Black parries the threat of ♗xc6 followed by  $\text{dxc5}$  that was created by White's last move.

### 7.♗b3

Finally, the bishop takes the f7-pawn under observation, but Black is well enough developed to avoid any major trouble.

### 7...d6

Black over-defends his e-pawn and creates the threat of ... $\text{dxa5}$ . At the same time, he opens the c8-h3 diagonal for the bishop.

The alternative is 7...0-0, when play may just transpose after 8.c3 d6. The sharp Marshall Attack (8...d5) is not part of this book's subject and, from the point of view of our main line, the move order starting with 7...d6 is more accurate. Castling on the 7<sup>th</sup> move would leave Black with some minor problems after 8.a4.

### 8.c3

White clears the c2-square for his bishop and prepares the occupation of the centre.

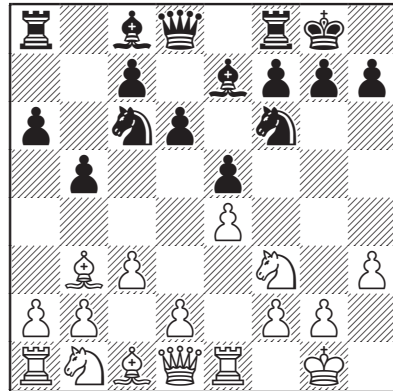
8.a4 would be less effective because of 8...♗g4, creating the threats ... $\text{dxd4}$  or ... $\text{dxf3}$  followed by ... $\text{dxd4}$ . After 9.c3 0-0 Black is ready to question White's strategy with ... $\text{dxa5}$  followed by ...b4, when the weaknesses induced by the early advance of the a-pawn leaves the Spanish bishop rather exposed.

### 8...0-0

Now, the rushed 9.d4 would allow Black to complete his development in a natural way with 9...♗g4, putting the enemy centre under strong pressure. Therefore, the prophylactic

### 9.h3

should be regarded as a more consistent continuation.



Thus, we finally reach what can safely be considered the main tabiya of the open games.

There are several reasons to claim this. First of all, an examination of all the possible deviations clearly shows that Black's first move cannot be easily challenged by an early and unprepared action in the centre. (Some of these lines have been examined in *Beating the Open Games*, while the rest of them were reviewed above and will be examined in this book at a later stage.) More than one century of practice supports this point of view. Finally, we can note that contrary to the situation in the so-called sidelines where Black usually chooses between two or three reasonable variations, in the diagrammed position countless numbers of systems have been tried for Black: the Breyer, the Smyslov, the Zaitsev, and then a whole series of Chigorin set-ups connected with names such as Rauzer, Panov, Keres, Romanishin, Graf, as well as many other lines without specific names, but which have been part of the main repertoire of great players, including world champions, throughout chess history.

This is hardly a sign that Black can equalize however he wishes against the main line of the Ruy Lopez; instead it is proof that against each of these systems White has continually found new ways of keeping his opponent under positional pressure, regularly forcing Black to come up with a new set-up. In fact, the wisest approach for a player who mainly relies on the closed lines of the Ruy Lopez with Black is to periodically switch from one system to another in order not only to avoid specific preparation by one's opponents, but also to gain a wider understanding of chess in general.

In the diagrammed position, White is just one step away from achieving his primary goal, the stable occupation of the centre, but this does not necessarily mean that he has won the strategic battle yet. Since it is quite obvious that Black cannot physically prevent 10.d4, he has to look for an optimal way of meeting it. It is hard to claim that any of the variations listed above is better than another, which means that the word "optimal" needs further explanation. A player should choose Black's further system of development in accordance with his general level of understanding, style of play, personal taste and, why not, with his general mood on the particular day.

It goes without saying that my choice of the repertoire systems contains a high degree of subjectivity.

I intentionally avoided fashionable systems. Experience has taught me that fashion is an unpredictable and capricious lady; after certain variations have been well-enough forgotten, they might come back into the limelight. Secondly (and more importantly I would say), the task of catching the very essence of the position in lines where theory advances with big steps (not necessarily in the correct direction) is rather difficult. It is much easier to take a photo or sketch a portrait of a virtually immobile image than to describe a highly animated scene.

Instead, I have preferred to choose variations with a very long past, involving the names of great players including world champions. This

will give us the opportunity of following the evolution of thought processes through the years. It is also supposed to lend some stability to the theoretical conclusions given in the following pages. Truths that have required years or even decades to unfold completely to human understanding, and involve names like Rubinstein, Botvinnik, Keres, Smyslov, Petrosian or Karpov will hardly ever be shaken by practice or with the help of a computer. I must confess that, apart from some rare moments of fear that I would not manage to make these "antiquities" viable, I have never regretted my choice during the whole working process. I rather felt as though I was drinking a very old wine, discovered in a hidden corner of my cellar.

Another aim of mine has been to make the information useful in general, and not just relevant to the specific variations. If some of the readers would like to make a choice of their own against the main variation of the Ruy Lopez, the strategic explanation given below should help their orientation.

All these self-imposed restrictions left me with a relatively narrow domain. After some further pondering and hesitations, I picked two of the oldest sub-lines of the Chigorin Variation, which, in its turn, is the oldest way of reacting to the main line of the Ruy Lopez.

Strictly speaking, the move

**9...♖a5**

which defines the Chigorin system, looks like a small deviation from the logical course of development. Indeed, Black moves for the second time with an already developed piece, while the c8-bishop is still on its initial square.

From this perspective, the more natural move is 9...♗b7, which in fact leads to the highly fashionable Zaitsev Variation, a system that endured a thorough examination during the matches between Kasparov and Karpov.

However, there are certain elements of the position that explain why the generally good and logical move 9...♗b7 is not necessarily the only correct or at least the very best one.

After 10.d4 Black cannot easily question White's supremacy in the centre in the near future. The main reason is that the c6-knight is tied to the defence of the e5-pawn, thus blocking his c-pawn, which under different circumstances could be used to undermine the d4-pawn. At the same time, it is uncertain yet whether the development of the bishop to b7 is useful, in view of White's possibility of closing the centre with d5 whenever he wishes.

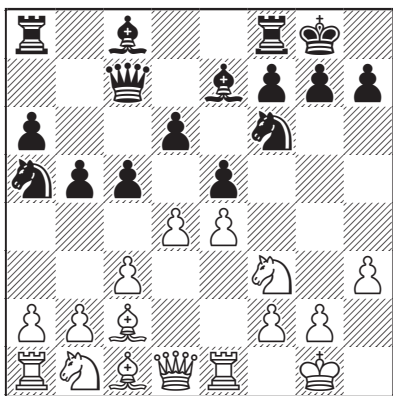
In fact, virtually all Black's possible continuations on the 9<sup>th</sup> move have minor drawbacks, which, I repeat, makes the choice at this stage a mere matter of taste. I do not intend to question the correctness of 9...♖b7 or prove the superiority of 9...♗a5 in any way, but aim to explain that in this last phase of development concrete thinking can and should be tightly connected with the appliance of general rules.

Let us now return to the Chigorin Variation.

#### 10.♖c2 c5

Anticipating White's next move, Black prepares to put up strong resistance in the centre.

#### 11.d4 ♖c7



This is the main *tabiya* of the Chigorin variation. Other moves have been played (mainly 11...♖b7 and 11...♗d7), but in the vast majority of games (about three-quarters) Black prefers to defend the e5-pawn with the queen, maintaining maximum flexibility for his position.

The term “flexibility” mainly refers to the fate of the queenside minor pieces. Developing the bishop to b7 now or slightly later would put the white centre under immediate pressure, but the simple advance of the d-pawn would solve this problem, leaving the bishop terribly passive on b7. Black can correct the bishop's placement in a rather simple way, with a further ...♖c8. Although this would mean the loss of two whole tempi, it would at least avoid irreparable damage to the general harmony of the position.

The problem of the a5-knight is slightly more demanding. If Black does not manage to find a comfortable location, or at least a useful job for it, he will most likely face insurmountable strategic problems. Dr. Tarrasch's warning, “If one piece stands badly, the whole position is bad” applies perfectly here. And yet, it is not easy for White to cut the knight out of play *completely*. The hidden interactions between pieces placed on different areas of the board can lead to surprising results. To a certain extent, the situation is similar to that arising in the Yugoslav variation of the fianchetto King's Indian.

I believe that this latter aspect deserves a small digression. We, modern chess players, are accustomed to using the generic terminology of a *pawn structure typical of the King's Indian Defence* whenever White blocks the centre with the strategically dreaded triangle c4-d5-e4. But this structure can arise from several other openings as well, including the Closed Ruy Lopez. Historically speaking, the choice of name is not entirely correct, because the Ruy Lopez acquired coherent theoretical contours decades earlier than the King's Indian. However, for practical reasons I find it perfectly adequate. There is no such *typical Ruy Lopez-structure*, since the opening is much too complex and flexible, while the aforementioned blocked position almost defines the King's Indian.

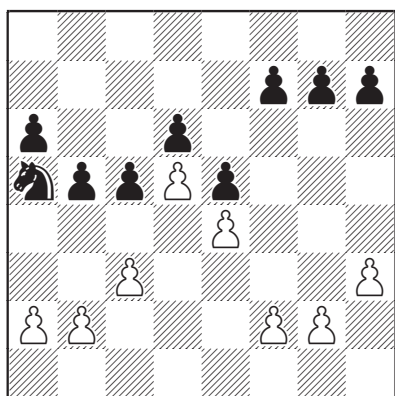
Let us return to the issue of the a5-knight.

The next examples will illustrate the typical problems facing Black if he fails to solve this delicate matter in an adequate way. They are not intended to discourage the reader from playing

the Chigorin line, but to offer a clearer image of the kind of positions that should be avoided.

All fragments are taken from games where the Ruy Lopez was played (although I was tempted to insert some games with the Yugoslav variation of the King's Indian Defence as well). In some of them Black chose set-ups other than the Chigorin variation, but play soon took a course that is relevant for our central subject.

The critical situation arises when White blocks the centre with d4-d5.



Having been deprived of the natural retreat to c6, the a5-knight has only two ways of regrouping.

From one point of view, the retreat to b7 is the most natural. The knight physically approaches the rest of Black's army, although this does not necessarily mean that the overall coordination is improved yet. In order to solve the problem, Black has to install his knight on c5 (after a preliminary ...c4 if the structure is as in the previous diagram or immediately if the c-pawns are missing as a consequence of an earlier exchange on d4).

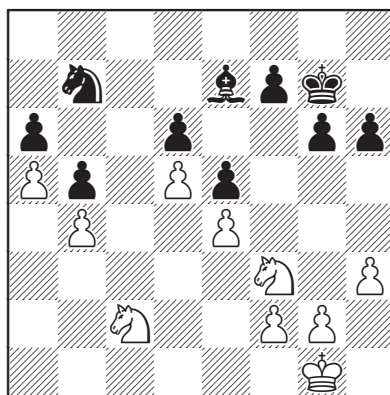
However, White has a strong remedy at his disposal. By playing b4 (or b3 and if ...c4, then b4) he can prevent Black's plan with a minimum of effort. The evaluation of the position depends greatly on Black's ability to use the relative weakness induced by b4 in order to generate queenside counterplay. For instance,

if the a1-rook is undefended, after ...a5 White cannot maintain a pawn on b4, being forced to give up the control of the c5-square. If such rapid counterplay is not available, Black's situation could become critical from a long-term perspective.

The following game fragment illustrates the nature of Black's problems in its pure form. In spite of the fact that almost all the other pieces were exchanged, the knight's bad position on b7 was the main cause of his defeat.

### Spassky – Kholmov

Soviet Championship, Yerevan 1962



At a superficial glance it might look as if Black had no problems at all. The queenside is safely blocked, while on the other wing only Black can start active operations. The knight's awkward position seems to be temporary, because after the standard ...f5 it could go to f7.

Unfortunately for Black, things are not that simple. A deeper look reveals a remarkable detail: the solidity of the queenside is undermined precisely by the dreadfully placed knight. The threat ♖a3xb5 is very unpleasant, because after ...axb5, a6 Black could not parry the threats a7 and axb7 simultaneously. Black has no time to regroup properly. If 30...♞d8, then after 31.♞a3 he is not in time to transfer the bishop to the queenside in order to stop the a-pawn. In fact, this is one of the indirect but