

The Benko Revisited

Volume 1

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Volume 1

Alexey Kovalchuk

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☉	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⊃	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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Preface

My acquaintance with and attitude to the Benko Gambit.

Dear reader, I am delighted to present you with the first part of my work on the Benko Gambit. I hope that my work will help you achieve great results in your own games, but to begin with I would like to tell you about my first acquaintance with this wonderful, dynamic opening.

I learned to play chess quite late, at the age of 12. From my first acquaintance with chess, I was often drawn to sharp games and I really liked bringing the bishop to g7. I felt the dynamic potential of this piece and I began to use the King's Indian Defense, then I became more and more interested in other interesting constructions, such as the Modern-Benoni and Grünfeld Defense. For a long time I was skeptical about the Benko Gambit, ever since the book by Boris Avrukh – *Grandmaster Repertoire 2 - 1.d4 volume 2* – was published. It was 2010 and at that time, I took every author's word for it and never tried to refute any analyzes, so I was suspicious of the Benko Gambit for a long time.

Everything changed in 2012, however, as the wonderful book *Attack with Black* by Ukrainian Grandmaster Valeriy Aveskulov was published; I was amazed by this book. I liked the lines suggested by the author; besides, there were improvements in Avrukh's recommendations, and therefore, comparing the analyzes, I realized that playing the Benko Gambit is not only interesting, but also fun. I started playing this opening and the results were good. But then I lost a game to Dmitry Elizarov, a FIDE master from Rostov-on-Don, and this greatly influenced me. And then other opening tutorials came out that interested me with other possibilities of playing for Black. Well, the final knife in the back of the Benko Gambit was dealt by Alexey Kornev's book "Practical repertoire for White, Volume 3", in which the author chose the main line and recommended 12.a4 (This will be discussed in the second volume of *Benko Gambit Revisited*).

For many years I abandoned the Benko Gambit, considering it an incorrect opening. But the years passed, I still had great faith in any chess author, and I did not even work fully with the ChessBase program: I didn't have any real chess analysis of my own, I had only books and a lot of faith in the authors of these books. But then

gradually insights began to occur in my head: I began to doubt more and more the ways suggested by the authors, and gradually I began to analyze more and more and I realized that I myself could analyze and offer excellent solutions. The next meeting greatly influenced my perception of the game and the opening approach.

In 2019, at a tournament in the city of Sochi, I met Timur Gareyev, the world record holder in blindfold chess. Timur is a very original grandmaster, one who likes to surprise his opponent with unexpected and rare variations. He analyzed his schemes a lot using cloud engines, and when I looked I realized that his approach was very interesting. I also began to analyze new schemes for myself and began to discover other chess ideas. In the fall of 2019, together with Timur Gareev, I played at a tournament in St. Petersburg. In one of the games, he used the Benko Gambit! I was surprised he played this variation, but Timur believed – and still believes – in this opening. In addition, he played the Benko Gambit at the 2021 World Chess Cup against the strong grandmaster Vladimir Fedoseev and ended up with a draw!

Therefore, I tried to analyze the Benko Gambit again. The analysis was greatly influenced by the Leela Chess Zero neural network. It was thanks to her that I believed in the Benko Gambit! Gradually analyzing more and more, I came to the conclusion that this opening is playable and Black's resources are not exhausted. I started playing it again and I was especially good at using this opening in rapid and blitz. In chess with shorter time controls, the initiative is especially important, so the Benko Gambit proved to be especially good. Yes, we sacrifice a pawn, but we have a long-term initiative. So, gradually, the idea of creating this book was born to me though I did not remotely expect that it would be possible to write two books.

I was faced with different questions of how to play this or that line. Having spent a long time analyzing, it seems to me that I have successfully solved these problems. I am grateful to the chess publishing house, "Thinkers Publishing", and in particular to its director, Daniël Vanheirzeele, who believed in my idea and ensured my work was published.

History of the Benko Gambit

For the first time, the Benko Gambit – known also as the Volga Gambit in certain parts of the world as will be explained below – was met in the game Rubinstein-Spielmann, in 1922. This game saw: 1. d4  2.  c5 3. d5 b5 This is similar to the idea of the Benko Gambit and is known in theory as the Pseudo-Benko Gambit. Then Rubinstein played 4. c4 which led to one of the tabia of the Benko Gambit

proper. Nevertheless, if we take the classic variation of the Benko Gambit after the moves 1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 c5 3. d5 b5 then, judging by my database, it was played like this for the first time in the game Stahlberg-Stoltz, Stockholm 1933. Thus it appears, in fact, that this gambit was first used by a Swedish grandmaster, Gösta Leonard Stoltz, a six-time Swedish champion (by the way, the game ended in a draw, but afterwards grandmaster Stoltz didn't play like this way again because he had a very bad position right from the opening.) After Stoltz, the opening was adopted by the Lithuanian and Canadian chess player, International Master Povilas Vaitonis. And with great results — 3/3!

In Russian-speaking countries, this opening is called the Volga Gambit – the name proposed by the famous Soviet International Master, Peter Romanovsky, after a 1946 article by a Kuibyshev (now this city is called Samara, and sits on the Volga and Samara rivers) chess player, Boris Argunov, was published in issue No. 2 of the magazine, *Chess in the USSR*. This article was called "Notes on the Volga Gambit" and in it the author considers the modern interpretation of this opening, namely 1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 c5 3. d5 b5 4. cxb5 a6. This article was small and mostly for informational purposes. Only later did Black find the idea associated with ...g7-g6, which is associated with the development of the initiative on the queenside.

In the West, and in many books, the opening is called the Benko Gambit and to this very day all over the world this opening boasts a double name – some call her the Volga Gambit, some call him the Benko Gambit. I still prefer to call this opening the Volga Gambit, after the Soviet chessplayers who suggested this name. But, of course, Grandmaster Pal Benko expanded the possibilities of the variation. By the way, if we take historical justice as a guide, then this gambit could also be called "Swedish", since – as was noted earlier – a version of the opening was played by a Swedish grandmaster. If we go back even further, the name "Spielmann's Gambit" is not bad. But dear reader, these are my personal fantasies, and for the purposes of publishing these books we have agreed to call it the Benko Gambit!

Whatever name we choose, this audacious gambit had a reputation for being a flawed way to begin a game, but then the American grandmaster Pal Benko – who produced a number of victories in the 60s and 70s – made a great contribution to the development of this gambit.

In Garry Kasparov's book, *Revolution in the 70s*, Lev Alburts' memoirs are also noted, with Lev a prominent specialist of this opening in those years. "At the beginning of 1971, I accidentally read in *Chess in the USSR* a translation of Brown's

article from Chess Life (1970) "Is the Counter-Gambit Correct?" The author told about his games with Gligoric, Ivkov and Padevsky, played in the 1970s by the Benko Gambit. And by the way, he noticed: here it is sometimes advantageous for Black to exchange queens (this was noticed by Bronstein, per Garry Kasparov's note). It's a paradox: after all, Black sacrificed a pawn for the initiative and it seems that he needs to play with the queens, especially since White has a protected passed a-pawn. .. But gradually I realized that the exchange of queens is indeed almost always in Black's favor! It turns out that with queens on, White has more chances to attack. Besides it is difficult for Black to undermine the center with ...f7-f5, which is very effective without queens.

"Having made this discovery for myself, I immediately adopted the gambit, and it brought me a lot of points! Opponents played ♔e2, and after the reply ... ♔a6 they looked at me as if I was crazy and happily chopped on a6. Then they made a couple of moves, made sure that White had nothing, offered a draw and ... were surprised again, getting a refusal. At home, I analyzed the Benko endgame a lot, almost to bare kings, looking for ways to win for Black. And I developed a whole set of principles: which pieces should be left, which ones should be exchanged. Usually, the more pieces there are, the more chances Black has to win ... "

Work on the book

I've used engines to aid my analysis, namely: Stockfish, Leela Chess Zero, Komodo, and Fat Fritz.

When writing the book, I tried to provide comprehensive answers to all likely moves and possible replies, impossible though that may be. However, I think this book will be useful both for keen amateur players and those of a higher standard, even up to Grandmaster level. For most of the options, I have tried to explain why I think that the assessment is the way it is - this will be especially useful for amateurs who will understand the essence of the position thanks to words rather than a simple, dry numerical or figurative assessment.

When analyzing, I often asked myself questions, for example: "What will happen if the pawn is destroyed?" and "If White plays like this, what is the best way to react?" and so on, etc. Therefore, sometimes the analysis grew like a large tree of options. Nevertheless, I believe that it is better to give as comprehensive an answer as possible than not to give it. If a point is clear to the reader, he can skip some lines.

Relevance of the opening book

Any and every opening book is out of date. Unfortunately this is true and there is no getting away from it. But why do I recommend my book to you, dear reader? First of all, the lines are all analyzed very deeply. You do not have to turn on the engine and wait for the computer to produce a ready-made solution. Believe me, in analyzing this book, I used the most modern equipment, and thus the reader saves a lot of time. In our information age, time is very precious, and by buying my book you will gain at least time. I have spent a huge amount of my own time analyzing the various lines, but also commenting on the options especially for you, my friends.

In addition, in this book's pages you will find tons of novelties not seen in practice, and in many of the lines I offer strong improvements. Many sources were reviewed, where the authors defended certain options from White's point of view, while I defended Black's side. In addition, this book has absorbed my attitude and approach to various positions, and I have been analyzing the Benko Gambit for more than 10 years! I wanted to approach each position from the point of view of a human, as close as possible to a practical game. In addition, even if this book becomes outdated at some point, I am sure that it will always be possible to improve the variations – but the backbone of studying this opening can be taken from this book; this is normal work on chess.

When and against whom can the Benko Gambit be played?

You can play this opening against anyone. This opening is especially well suited for rapid and blitz games, since in the reduced time control in particular the role of the initiative increases. Generally speaking, not in every opening will you find such a thing as Black having the initiative from the very first moves (although this pleasure is paid for with a whole pawn!). I played this opening with a classical time control against the ex-champion of Russia, Grandmaster Igor Lysyj, and very comfortably equalized in the opening, although later the class difference showed and my eminent opponent beat me. Nevertheless, the opening had absolutely nothing to do with it. This opening worked great when I played it in Rostov-on-Don, when I beat many strong players and after that they preferred to play 1.c4, doing whatever they could to avoid the Benko Gambit. Of course, to my understanding this opening is especially good to play against amateurs, or weaker players than yourself, who

do not know its intricacies – you can quickly get a promising position. This opening is suitable for active players striving for a lively, initiative-rich game, with a strong spirit. After all, you need to understand that if something goes wrong, you may face big problems, since you do not have a pawn, but as in any opening there are pluses and minuses, and in the Benko Gambit there are also disadvantages. First of all, in some places you need to play very accurately (this will be especially evident in the positions that we will consider in volume 2) and the cost of an error is quite high. But if the reader carefully studies the books, then I think that there should be no problems and the Benko Gambit will give you many of your most interesting fights!

Why did I write a book in two volumes?

I think this question may arise from many readers, so I will immediately give an answer in absentia. The fact is that during the process of writing the book, it turned out that there was quite a lot of material, so we – myself and Thinkers Chess Publishing – decided to make the book in two volumes. The first volume deals with rare lines, or lines in which White avoids the most principled lines, while the second volume deals with the main lines of the Benko Gambit. In this volume, we will look at the rare moves after 1. d4 ♖f6 2. c4 c5. For example, 3. dxc5, 3. e3, 3. ♗f3, all of which you will need – and get! – an answer to. We will also touch on move orders such as: 1. d4 ♗f6 2. ♗f3 c5 3. d5 b5 and, further, we will consider more basic lines after the moves: 1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 c5 3. d5 b5. In fact, we will consider all moves except the most popular – 4. cxb5 – as the second volume will be devoted to this continuation.

Dear reader,

I hope this book will help you in your own practice and games and that you can take advantage of my advice. I would also appreciate your feedback, notes or comments. You can contact me by e-mail: alexekov@yandex.ru I wish you happiness, health and prosperity.

Alexey Kovalchuk, Taganrog, Russia, January 2022

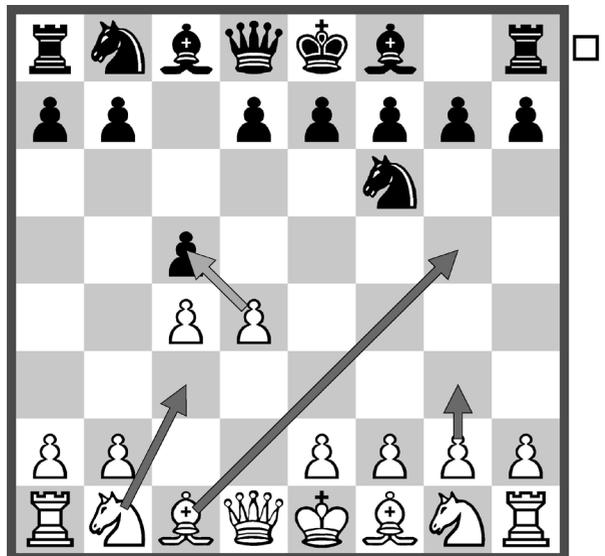
Part I

Minor Sidelines Without 3.d5



Various 3rd Move Sidelines

1.d4 ♞f6 2.c4 c5 3.--



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – Various 3rd Move Sidelines

1.d4 f6 2.c4 c5

a) 3.-- 17

b) 3.c3 20

c) 3.cxd5 e6 4.-- 25

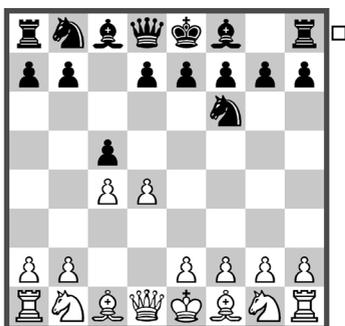
d) 3.dxc5 e6 4.g3 32

e) 3.dxc5 e6 4.f3 39

f) 3.dxc5 e6 4.c3..... 42

a) 3.--**1. d4** ♖f6 **2. c4 c5**

In the opening, the control of and struggle for the central squares is of enormous importance, so with the last move Black wants to put pressure on the d4-square. White has many interesting possibilities, but the main one is the capture of space with 3.d5, which we will look at in the following chapters. In this chapter, we will look at some rather rare continuations.



Position after: 2... c5

3. g3?!

We can't say it's great timing to play this move.

A) 3. ♗f4?! This only helps Black. 3... cxd4 4. ♖xd4 [4. ♗xb8?! ♗xb8 5. ♖xd4 Black does not need to defend the a7-pawn, but can play actively instead: 5... b5!N 6. ♖xa7 ♗b7 7. ♖d4 bxc4 8. ♖xc4 e5 9. ♖c2 d5 10. ♗d2 ♗b4 11. ♗gf3 e4 12. a3 ♗a5 13. b4

♗b6→ Black has better development for a pawn; White's position is hopeless.] 4... ♗c6 5. ♖d1 e5 6. ♗g5 Very often, when the c1-bishop leaves its shelter, one can pester the b2 pawn, so, 6... ♖b6!N



Position after: 6... ♖b6!N

7. ♗d2 7... ♖xb2 8. ♗xf6 ♗b4! 9. ♗c1 gxf6→ Black has both a material and positional advantage.

B) 3. ♗g5? ♖b6! Attacking b2 and d4. 4. ♖b3 [If 4. ♗xf6 0-1 (49) Alpala Mejia, D – Vergara, D (1966) Lichess.org INT 2020 Don't be shy, you need to take the pawn. 4... ♖xb2!



Position after: 4... ♖xb2!

5. ♗d2 exf6 6. ♗gf3 ♗c6→ An extra

pawn and two bishops give Black a decisive advantage.] The easiest now was 4... ♖xb3 5. axb3 cxd4 6. g3 ♘c6 7. ♙g2 e5—+ with a healthy extra pawn.

3... cxd4 4. ♖xd4 ♘c6

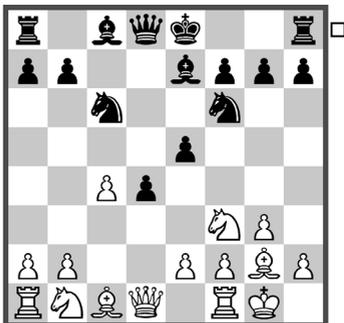
The white queen has come under attack and must retreat, thus Black wins time.

5. ♖d1 d5 6. ♙g2

6. cxd5 After this Black's play is quite simple 6... ♖xd5 7. ♖xd5 ♘xd5 8. ♙g2 ♘db4 9. ♘a3 e5 10. ♙d2 ♙e6— Black's pieces are aggressive, the knight on b4 is especially strong, and White's a2 pawn is also weak.

6... d4! 7. ♘f3 e5 8. 0-0 ♙e7

Black has seized the center with his pawns and already seems to be playing as though with the white pieces.



Position after: 8... ♙e7

9. e3

The most natural continuation; White

also fights for the center. Instead:

A) 9. b4 e4 10. ♘g5 has been seen previously and I now recommend the improvement 10... d3!N



Position after: 10... d3!N

11. exd3 [But not 11. ♘xe4? ♘xe4 12. ♙xe4 ♙f6—+ when White is losing material.] 11... ♙g4! 12. ♖b3 ♘d4 13. ♖a4+ b5! 14. cxb5 0-0 15. ♙e3 ♘e2+ 16. ♙h1 exd3!— Black is much better; he has a strong passed pawn on d3, and it is dangerous to grab the rook on a8 as the light squares in White's camp will be fatally weakened.

B) 9. b3 A slow approach. 9... 0-0

B1) 10. e3 was better, for example: ♙g4 11. h3 ♙h5 12. g4 ♙g6 13. exd4 exd4 14. ♘h4 ♙e4 15. a3 [On 15. f3 there is 15... ♘d7—+] 15... ♙xg2 16. ♘xg2 ♘e4— The d4-pawn is strong, Black is also ahead of White in development, and the advanced position of the pawns on the kingside is in Black's favor as he can pester them by playing ... f7-f5

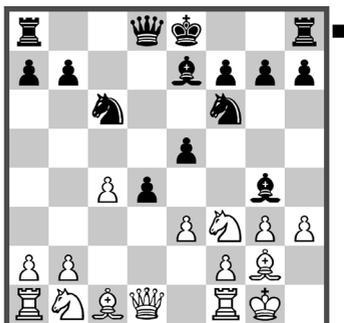
B2) 10. ♙b2?



Position after: 10. ♖b2?

Here the bishop unsuccessfully faces off against the d4-pawn; White apparently wants to expand the bishop's activity by playing e2-e3, but this leads to a bad position: 10... ♗f5 11. ♘h4 [11. e3? is very sad after 11... dxe3 12. ♘xe5 exf2+ 13. ♔h1 ♕xd1 14. ♖xd1 ♖ad8 and Black has a big advantage] 11... ♗e6 12. ♘d2 a5 13. ♕b1 ♕d7 14. ♖d1 ♖ad8 15. a3 ♖fe8 16. ♕c2 ♘g4 17. ♘hf3 ♗f5→ Black has a great positional advantage, and here he will play ...e5-e4, further clamping White in a vice.

9... ♗g4 10. h3



Position after: 10. h3

Having caused the h-pawn to move, Black can simply retreat the bishop.

10... ♗e6N 11. exd4 exd4 12. ♘bd2 0-0 13. ♖e1 ♖e8 14. a3 a5 15. ♘b3 d3



Position after: 15... d3

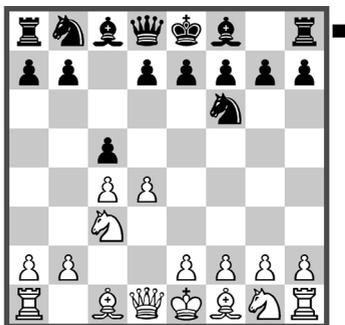
The d-pawn boldly advances without fear of capture.

16. ♗e3 ♗xc4 17. ♖c1 ♗a6 18. ♘bd4 ♘xd4 19. ♗xd4 ♗f8 20. ♖xe8 ♕xe8 21. ♗f1 ♕e4 22. ♖c3 ♘d5↑

White has not solved his problems, and even if he regains the d3-pawn, thanks to the activity of the pieces the initiative is on the side of the black pieces.

b) 3. ♘c3

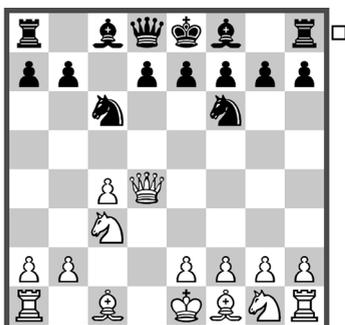
1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 c5 3. ♘c3



Position after: 3. ♘c3

This move has been encountered in practice. It is sometimes played by amateurs but very rarely by strong players. Of course, if my opponent played something like this against me, I would be very happy.

3... cxd4 4. ♙xd4 ♘c6



Position after: 4... ♘c6

That's it. Black brings out a piece, and White must again move the strongest piece, wasting precious time. Let's take

a look at the various queen moves.

5. ♙d1

The safest move, as from here the queen does not prevent its pieces from entering the game and does not fall in battle itself. On the other hand, this is a sad move, as White did not improve his position in any way. We should consider White's other attempts to improve the queen more aggressively. For example:

A) 5. ♙d2?! White may have problems after this. It is usually played with a plan to bring the bishop to b2, but the problem with this continuation is that Black can immediately pose problems: 5... e6! With a specific positional threat of ...♙b4



Position after: 5... e6!

A1) 6. e4!? In practice, no one has ever played 6... ♘xe4!N 7. ♘xe4 d5 8. cxd5 exd5 9. ♘c3 d4 10. ♘f3 [Worse is 10. ♙e2+? ♙e7 11. ♘d1 0-0 12. ♘f3 ♙g4+ White has retained his piece, but he has lost a lot in

development, and since his king is located in the center, the clouds will soon gather over him.] 10... ♖c5 11. ♔e2+ ♗e7 12. ♘e4 0-0 13. a3 ♗f5↑ White has an extra piece, but he is lagging behind in development and his king is in the center. These factors give Black more than enough compensation for the piece, and it is he who plays to win.

A2) 6. e3 This has no independent meaning after 6...d5 7. ♘f3 ♗d6 8. cxd5 exd5 9. a3 (see 6.a3.)

A3) 6. ♘f3 White ignores the threat of ...♗b4. 6...d5 7. cxd5 exd5 8. e3 ♗b4



Position after: 8... ♗b4

We can clearly see that White's position is devoid of harmony. 9. ♗d3 0-0 10. 0-0 ♗g4 11. a3 and now 11... ♗xc3!N is strong. 12. bxc3 ♗xf3 13. gxf3 ♘d7 14. ♔h1 ♘c5↑ Usually two bishops represent great strength, but we are dealing with an exception. White's pawn structure is damaged and therefore Black's chances are much greater.

A4) 6. a3 A clear move, preventing the bishop's lunge. 6... d5 7. cxd5 exd5 8. e3 ♗d6 9. ♘f3 0-0 10. b4?! ♘e4!



Position after: 10... ♘e4!

11. ♘xe4 [Worse was 11. ♔c2? ♗f5 12. ♗d3 ♖c8→ The most unpleasant ...♗b4 or ...♘b4 is threatened, and White's position is hopeless.] 11... dxe4 12. ♘d4 ♔f6 13. ♗b2 ♘e5 14. ♗e2 ♖d8↑ White's position is alarming. It is not clear what to do with his king to reunite the rooks and bring them into play. For example on 15. 0-0 Black has 15... ♔g6→ with great attacking prospects against the white king.

B) 5. ♔d3!? Here the queen can also come under attack, especially from the swoops of knights. 5... g6 6. ♘f3 ♗g7



Position after: 6... ♗g7

B1) 7. a3?! This slow move was made in a correspondence game. After 7...d6 8. e4 ♖g4 9. ♙e2 ♜c8 10. b4? Even in a game played by correspondence there is a place for oversights and rude awakenings! [10. ♜b1!? was better. 10... ♙xf3 11. ♚xf3 ♘d4 12. ♚d3 ♘d7 with the threat of ... ♘e5 and an attack on the c4-pawn. The black knight on d4 is indirectly protected due to the discovered check.] 10... ♘xe4! 11. ♙b2 ♙f5 Black had an extra pawn and a positional advantage in Pronovost, D (1876) – Huber, F (1825) ICCF email 2014.

B2) 7. g3 Of course, it is worth considering how the game develops with fianchettoing. 7... d6 8. ♙g2 Now I like the idea of provoking White into weakening his position. 8... ♙f5!N 9. e4 ♙g4 10. ♙f4



Position after: 10. ♙f4

Of course, it's difficult to analyze everything, but I like the following illustrative line. 10... h5! 11. 0-0 ♘d7 12. h3 ♙xf3 13. ♚xf3 ♘de5 14. ♚e2 ♘d4↑.

B3) 7. e4 White sets up the Maroczy

pawn structure. However, it should be noted that the position of the queen on d3 is unfortunate. 7... d6, and now:



Position after: 7... d6

B3.1) 8. h3 It is possible not to let the bishop come to g4 but now it is good to improve the position of the black steed: 8... ♘d7! 9. ♙e2 ♘c5 10. ♚e3 ♘b4 11. ♚d2 ♙d7 12. 0-0 0-0 13. ♜b1 ♙xc3! Nowadays, do not be afraid to give up such mighty bishops, in return for a healthy pawn. 14. bxc3 ♘ba6 15. ♚h6 f6 16. ♘d4 e5 17. ♘b5 ♘xe4. White has some compensation for the material damage, but this is not sufficient to equalize the odds.

B3.2) 8. ♙e2 ♙g4 9. 0-0 Nobody has yet played 9... ♙xf3N 10. ♚xf3 ♘d4 11. ♚d3 ♘d7 12. ♜b1 ♘xe2+ 13. ♘xe2 ♚a5∞ Black's position is no worse and in practical play I would choose Black's side.

C) 5. ♚h4?! It may seem that this active move is not bad, however, Black has the strong reply 5... ♘b4!