

# Plugging Away at the Petroff

By GM Andy Soltis

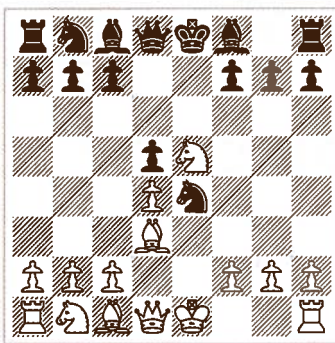
*Openings fall in—and out—of fashion. But the reputation of one defense has steadily improved for more than 30 years, as any aggravated 1. e4 player can tell you.*

“The truth is that a few years ago I came to hate chess,” GM Alexander Grischuk told an interviewer last year.

OK, everyone has moments when they feel like they’d be having a lot more fun playing something else, even Chutes and Ladders. But why would one of the world’s top-10 players turn against chess?

Grischuk explained: “I spent months studying the Russian Game (Petroff Defense) and couldn’t find a refutation.” Like many people who earn a living from 1. e4, he was frustrated by the inability to find a good way to handle 1. ... e5 2. Nf3 Nf6!

How did we get to this point? After all, the Petroff was considered barely playable by king’s pawn mavens like Bobby Fischer. In Bobby’s day, White was supposed to guarantee himself an advantage with 3. d4!. The key line was 3. ... Nxe4 4. Bd3 d5 5. Nxe5.



After 5. Nxe5

But in 1967, David Hooper of England presented the case for Black in a book, *A Complete Defense to 1. P-K4*. A new generation of Petroff players soon emerged, and among the members was a teenager from Rochester, New York named Ken Rogoff.

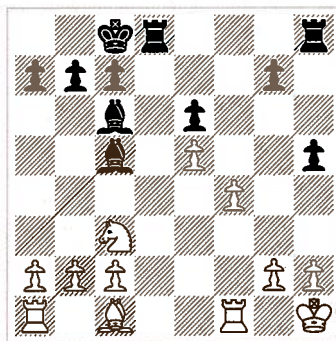
Rogoff, who had learned the moves at

age 12, found the defense was a great weapon against other juniors because they tried to crush it. They often reacted “impatiently to it, expecting a quick advantage, because the Petroff was regarded as too passive,” he recalled recently.

Rogoff discovered improvements on book theory. For example, Hooper’s book said “5. ... Nd7?” was refuted by 6. Qe2, which threatens to win a pawn with 7. Bxe4. After 6. ... Qe7 7. Bf4, Black’s development is a mess, as was shown in an 1896 match game between John F. Barry of Boston and Jackson Showalter of Kentucky.

But instead of the painfully defensive 6. ... Qe7?, Black should play 6. ... Nxe5!, Rogoff realized. After 7. Bxe4 dxe4 8. Qxe4 Be6 Black has great play for a pawn.

Rogoff demonstrated this in a 1973 game against George Kane, then one of the highest-rated players in the U.S. After 9. dxe5? Bd5 10. Qg4 h5! 11. Qh3 Qe7 12. f4 Qe6!, Black traded off White’s only good piece, his queen, and was clearly better following 13. Qxe6+ fxe6 14. 0-0 Bc5+ 15. Kh1 0-0-0 16. Nc3 Bc6.



After 16. ... Bc6

White tried to free his bishop with 17. f5 but that made 17. ... Rd4! devastating,

e.g. 18. Be3 Rg4 19. Bxc5 Rxc2 followed by a killing discovered check. The game ended with 18. h3 Rg4!! White resigned (19. hxg4 hxg4+ and mates).

Of course, there were improvements for White, and an obvious one was 9. Qxe5!, which GM Wolfgang Unzicker played against Rogoff at Amsterdam, 1980. Ken had worked out a good reply “in the late 1960s but had never had a chance to use it” until that game.

He gained time with 9. ... Qd7 10. Nc3 0-0-0 11. Be3 Bb4 12. 0-0 f6 13. Qf4 Bd6. Then 14. Qh4 h5 sets up a nasty threat of 15. ... g5. White allowed a bishops-of-opposite-color ending, 14. Qf3 Bg4 15. Qd5 Bxh2+ 16. Kxh2 Qxd5 17. Nxd5 Rxd5, and a quick draw.

This game should have set off alarm bells. If 6. ... Nxe5 was sound, then 3. d4 wasn’t the great move that opening theory claimed—and the Petroff was for real. But in those days, only the ideas of high-profile GMs seemed to get noticed, and Unzicker-Rogoff passed under the radar.

However, Bent Larsen recognized the value of the black gambit. Three months after Unzicker-Rogoff was played, he used it against World Champion Anatoly Karpov at Tilburg 1980. That game went 13. Qg3 and 13. ... Bxc3 14. bxc3 h5!

Larsen tried to prove that even though Black is a pawn down, he stands well because he can pound White’s weak light squares, such as with ... h4-h3. After 15. h4 Black continued 15. ... g5!, based on 16. hxg5? h4 17. Qh2 h3! with great play.

Karpov chose a different defense, 16. f3 Rdg3 17. Rf2 Qc6 18. Bd2, and then came 18. ... g4 19. f4 Bc4.

(see diagram top of next column)

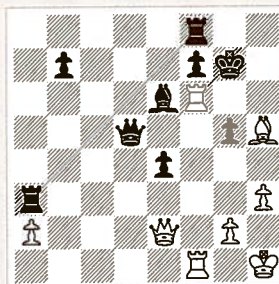
Black has an advantage of “half a bishop” as the Russians say: His bishop can play. White’s bishop can’t. Karpov

## 2009 World Junior

Only 18 players competed when the World Junior Championship was first contested, 59 years ago. The 2009 version, held in Puerto Madryn, Argentina, drew 84 players, including Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France, who won, and Alex Lenderman of the U.S., who tied for third. The tournament provides this month's quiz positions. In each of the six diagrams you are asked to find the fastest winning line of play. Usually this will mean the forced win of a decisive amount of material, such as a rook or minor piece. For Solutions, see Page 71.

### Problem I

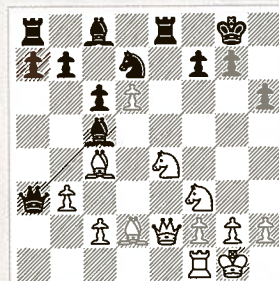
IM Pandian Karthikeyan  
Hernan Catelli



White to play

### Problem IV

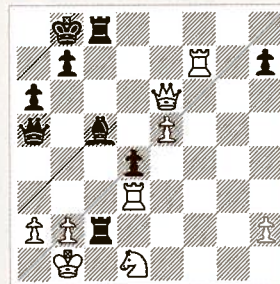
Andres Gallego Alcaraz  
Ramon Morales



White to play

### Problem II

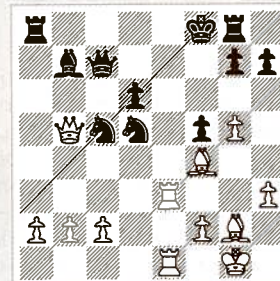
Pablo Salinas Herrera  
GM Dariusz Swiercz



Black to play

### Problem V

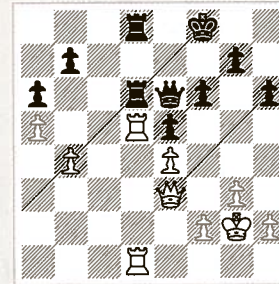
IM Baskaran Adhiban  
Sergio Mig Garcia Fuentes



White to play

### Problem III

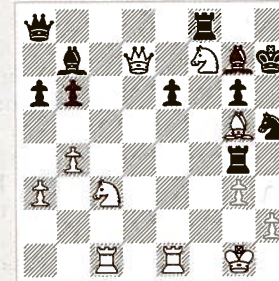
Eugenio Crespo  
Martin Ondrus



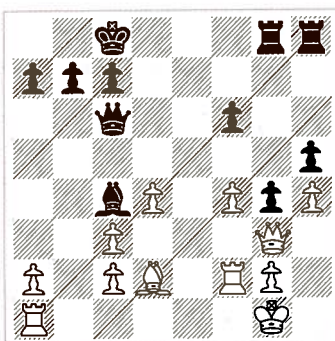
White to play

### Problem VI

Arno Bomans  
IM Giorgi Margvelashvili



Black to play



After 19. ... Bc4

tried to change that with 20. d5 Bxd5 21. f5.

But Black made steady progress, 21. ... Re8 22. a3 Re4 23. Re1 Rhe8 24. Rxe4 Rxe4 25. Kh2 Qc5 26. Bf4 Re1 27. Bd2 Ra1 28. Qe3 Qd6+ 29. Rf4 b6. White gave up another pawn but lost a long endgame after 30. c4 Bxc4 31. Qd4 Qxd4 32. Rxd4 Bb5 and ... Rxa3.

Since Karpov was considered virtually unbeatable with White in those days, Larsen's annotation of the game in the *Chess Informant* was widely read. He didn't claim any of his moves were new. He gave the Kane-Rogoff game in a note but, following the *Informant* policy of the day, there was no attribution, so they looked like Larsen's home analysis.

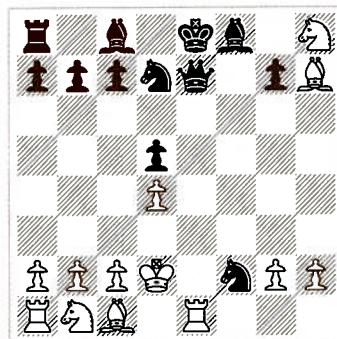
It seemed that it was the Dane who had come up with a major new weapon in 6. ... Nxe5!. Garry Kasparov repeated this myth in the fourth volume of his *Great*

*Predecessors* series.

In fact, the sacrifice is much older and may have first been analyzed by Karpov himself. When he was 15, he tried 5. ... Nd7 against an opening expert named Igor Zaitsev in a Leningrad tournament. That may have been the first time Karpov played the Petroff in a serious game.

Zaitsev replied 6. Nxf7!?. This is based on the king hunt that begins with 6. ... Kxf7 7. Qh5+ Ke6! 8. Bxe4 dxe4 9. d5+ Ke7 10. Bg5+ Nf6 11. Nc3.

Instead, Karpov chose the cautious 6. ... Qe7, which threatens 7. ... Nc3+ and 8. ... Nxd1 as well as 7. ... Qxf7. White found an ingenious defense—7. Nxh8! Nc3+ 8. Kd2 Nxd1 9. Re1 and then 9. ... Nxf2 10. Bxh7!.



After 10. Bxh7

Black has nothing better than 10. ... Ne4+ after which 11. Rxe4! dxe4 12. Bg6+ Kd8 13. Nf7+ Ke8 14. Nd6+ ended the

game in perpetual check.

Zaitsev annotated the game for *Shakhmaty v SSSR*, the most important magazine of the day. His key notes concerned the move that wasn't played, 6. Qe2. Zaitsev pointed out that Black could obtain excellent compensation by means of 6. ... Nxe5 7. Bxe4 dxe4 8. Qxe4 Be6 9. dxe5 Bd5 10. Qg4 h5 11. Qh3 Qe7 12. f4 g5 or 9. Qxe5 Qd7 10. 0-0 0-0-0 11. c3 Bd6 12. Qa5 Bd5. The last line is based on 13. Qxd5? Bxh2+ or 13. Qxa7 Qg4.

Whether this was Zaitsev's own analysis or something Karpov showed him in a post-mortem was unclear. But somehow it didn't get any more attention than the Rogoff games.

In any event, the remarkable comeback of the Petroff was in full swing by the early 1980s, thanks in large part to Karpov, who made the Petroff one of his main weapons, and to Zaitsev, who had become his second.

Karpov's opponents tried to squeeze an edge out of other Petroff lines, such as 3. Nxe5 instead of 3. d4. But, as they and countless other 1. e4 players, including Grischuk, found, Black has plenty of defensive resources there, too.

And Rogoff? He never got another chance to show what else he had discovered. He gave up competitive chess soon after the Unzicker game to pursue what turned into a brilliant career in economics. The Petroff revival took place without him. ■