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6 Real Sacrifices

As we progress in our chess career we develop a feeling for nuances. We learn to be satisfied if the return on our investment is small, as long as it is useful and the risk not too great. We sacrifice with modest expectations. Our aim is neither a winning attack nor a large material win. We seek compensation of various kinds and we speak of positional sacrifices in which the fruit remains rather vague. Compensation is the crucial word. It's an essential characteristic of a positional sacrifice. It can take many forms and it is definitely not limited to material for material. It may be manifested in the elimination of some strong enemy feature or in the support of one's own strong piece, in the damage done to the opponent's pawn-structure, in the strong squares created in it, in counterplay, etc.

We have a strong feeling that a positional sacrifice springs from the fundamental features of a certain position. It takes sound positional judgement and deep assessment of the position to weigh the positive and the negative on the sensitive scales of the positional sacrifice. We learn that material advantage may turn into a mirage, if the opponent obtains strong compensation in space or time and, therefore, we measure material against time and space. Many a time the initiative seized by a material sacrifice is not so strong as to overrun the defence or make decisive material gains. What we get is just a promising but still unclear attack or a spatial advantage. The result of the metamorphosis – material into initiative – remains vague and we speak of a 'real sacrifice'. What makes a real sacrifice difficult, psychologically and practically, is the fact that, as a rule, the opponent's replies are not as compulsory as in pseudo-sacrifices. There the danger lurks.

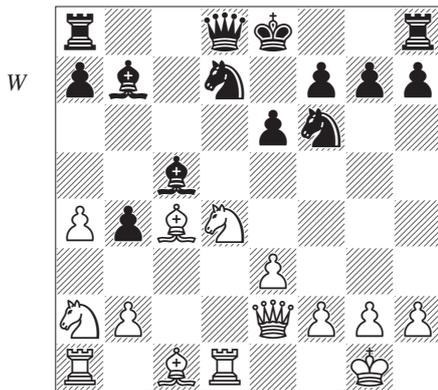
Real sacrifices happen in all stages of the game. In the opening they are more prudent, because the positions are still basically balanced and no wild risks are tolerable. The advantage has not shifted to one or the other side in a significant measure and one is cautious with one's

investments; sacrifices of large amounts of material would not be appropriate. A pawn, for example, is worth a couple of developing tempi or some strong positional feature, but it is a relatively small investment at a moment when the equilibrium has not been compromised. That is why we often encounter pawn and exchange sacrifices in the early stages, intended to destabilize the situation, to start an attack, to seize a spatial advantage, or perhaps to accentuate some positional advantage. In the middlegame, sacrifices are not limited to small fry – they range from pawn to queen sacrifices, with various goals to fulfil. The motifs are richer, the advantages more emphasized, be it in the form of a large spatial advantage or a strong initiative. Leaving the middlegame behind, we sacrifice to bring about a better endgame. They often involve a transition to a simpler position or are a way to beat back the opponent's attack. These, too, are mostly real sacrifices.

Each time we sacrifice material we take risks. We give up something real and we get in compensation something unclear. The risk involved is obvious whenever a complex and far-reaching evaluation is called for. Of course, if the final target is clear and obviously attainable, the positional sacrifice remains a pseudo-sacrifice as well. However, in general it is characterized by enduring uncertainties and often vague compensation. The risks and fears are therefore real.

Summing up, we could say that in comparison to the pseudo-sacrifice, the real sacrifice is not a more or less instantaneous metamorphosis, but a process initiated by the material offer. Its character is unforcing and the direction, therefore, unpredictable. Its analysis tree has many side-variations and the course unclear. In short, it's a risky affair, an act of intuition rather than of calculation. The long series of examples from master practice that we are about to examine shows this convincingly. We shall start with instructive examples from the carrier

of Grandmaster Alexander Kotov. They all deal with pawn sacrifices carried out in the early phase. Some of them may be regarded as borderline cases between pseudo- and real sacrifices.



Kotov – Szily
Moscow – Budapest 1949

In this variation of the Slav, White's problem is his queen's knight. It is sidelined on a2, and it will take a couple of tempi to bring it into battle via c1. White was in no mood to acquiesce to this slow, unpromising process and he decided to act more energetically:

13 e4!?

Relying on the pressure exerted on the d-file (especially on d7, which can be increased by ♖b5 at any moment), White seeks to speed up the development of his queen's bishop. So after 13...♙xe4 14 ♙g5 the pressure against the king stranded in the centre becomes palpable, while 14...0-0? does not work due to 15 ♗xe6.

13...♗xe4?

Disregarding the sensitive position of his king and the latent pressure on d7, Black accepts the sacrifice. This was an ill-advised step, allowing White to develop a very strong initiative, based on a series of tactical threats.

14 ♙e3!

The knight sacrifice on e6 still keeps Black from castling. He is obliged to invest another precious tempo in sheer survival.

14...♞e7

14...♞b6 exposes Black to 15 ♙b5 0-0-0 16 a5 with a strong attack. Closing the open file by 14...♗d6 prevents 15 ♙b5, but the blow hits

from the other side: 15 ♗xe6 fxe6 16 ♙xc5 ♗xc5 17 ♞h5+, etc.

15 ♙b5

The pin is unpleasant.

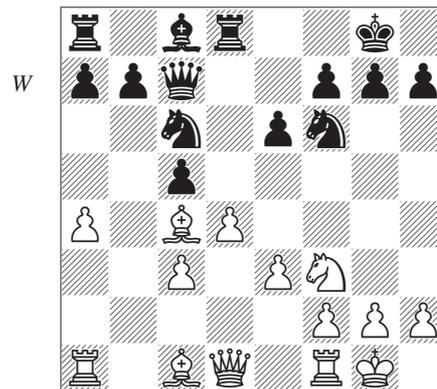
15...♙xd4

Black can't castle on either side: 15...0-0 16 ♗f5, or 15...0-0-0 16 ♗c6. Trying to diminish the pressure on d7 by 15...♗d6 fails to 16 ♙xd7+ ♞xd7 (or 16...♙xd7 17 ♗f5 exf5 18 ♞b5+) 17 ♗b5.

16 ♙xd4 ♗ec5 17 ♞ad1 ♙c8 18 ♞f3 ♞b8 19 ♗xb4 ♞b7 20 ♗c6

Black has managed to save the piece, but at the cost of a rueful lack of development and coordination. This soon ends in disaster...

20...♞f8 21 ♞d6 ♞xb5 22 axb5 ♗b7 23 ♞6d2 1-0



Kotov – Matanović
Saltsjöbaden/Stockholm IZ 1952

Black has just brought his rook to d8, threatening to win a pawn. White replied calmly:

12 ♙a3

I surmise that he guessed his opponent's thoughts and was ready to indulge his wish...

12...cxd4?

We shall soon feel that showing restraint by 12...b6 would have been wiser.

13 cxd4 ♗xd4 14 ♗xd4 ♞xc4 15 ♙e7!

The point of the sacrifice: while Black is still undeveloped, damaging the king's position will open it up for attack.

15...♞d5

The passive 15...♞e8 is worse: 16 ♙xf6 gxf6 17 ♞g4+ ♙h8 18 ♞h4.

16 ♖xf6 gxf6 17 ♜f3!

To 17 ♜g4+ Black would answer 17...♙g5, but now in case of 17...♖g7 18 ♜g4+ the defence on the fifth rank is ruled out because the black queen hangs with check. Then 18...♖h8 19 ♜f4 forces the weakening 19...f5, when 20 ♜h6 prepares 21 f4 and the rook-lift.

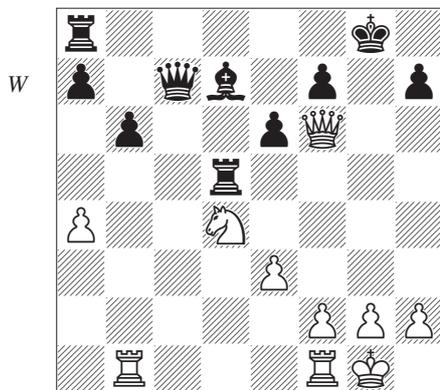
17...♙d7

17...e5 would lose the rook to 18 ♜fc1. 17...f5 again weakens the king's position, which can be exploited by 18 ♜g3+ ♖h8 19 ♜fc1 ♜b4 20 ♖b5, catching the rooks and the queen in a peculiar geometrical situation. Under the circumstances, finishing development seems most reasonable.

18 ♜xf6 ♜c7 19 ♜ab1

Black is ready to meet 19 f4 with 19...♙d8, but this apparently slow approach creates lasting threats. The a4-pawn is taboo because 19...♙xa4 20 ♜b4 would lift the rook into the mating attack via the fourth rank. At the same time the freeing ...♙d8 is delayed.

19...b6 (D)

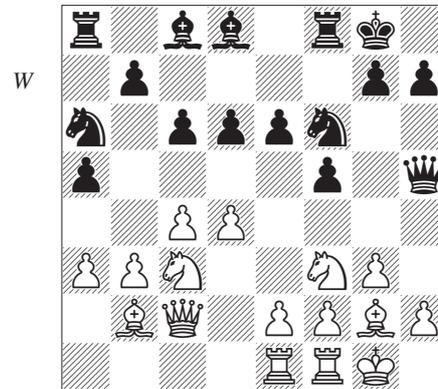


Note that as a by-product of the pressure on the b-file, the black bishop now loses its secure foothold on c6.

20 ♖f3 ♙d8 21 ♜f4 ♜c8 22 e4 ♜a5

The sacrifice has paid off nicely: the material balance has been established while Black suffers from a feeble, unprotected king. Now 23 ♖e5 f6! 24 ♖xd7 (if 24 ♖g4, then 24...e5) 24...♙xd7 25 ♜xf6 ♜f8 26 ♜h6 ♜xa4 27 ♜b3, as the game continued, simplified into a major-piece endgame in which the vulnerable position of the black king eventually told in White's favour. However, 23 ♜fd1 ♙e7 24 ♖e5 ♙xa4 25

♜d3 f6 (25...♜f8? 26 ♜h6!) 26 ♖g4 would have done the job quicker.



Flohr – Kotov
USSR Ch (Moscow) 1949

White now played:

13 e4

He had in mind 13...♖xe4 14 ♖xe4 fxe4 15 ♜xe4, when Black would have a poor pawn-formation and passive pieces. Black's bold and thematic response demonstrates he was alert to the dangers of such a structure.

13...e5! 14 dxe5 dxe5 15 ♖xe5 ♖c5

Black has given up a pawn to activate his pieces, starting with the wayward knight, and to increase the pressure on the e4-pawn. At the critical moment of transition into the middlegame it was a beneficial step. Black starts to breathe freely.

16 b4

Neither 16 exf5 ♖xf5 nor 16 f4 fxe4 17 ♖xe4 ♖f5 works for White, while the repetition of moves by 16 ♖f3 ♜h3 17 ♖g2 apparently did not satisfy him.

16...♖cxe4 17 ♖xe4 fxe4 18 c5?

At the moment, grabbing the e4-pawn would cost White an exchange. Having vacated the c4-square for a check, he is finally ready to capture it, but in doing so he surrenders the important central d5-square to the c8-bishop, which jumps at the chance! The course of the struggle suggests that the modest 18 f4 was much better.

18...♖e6! 19 ♖xe4 ♖xe4 20 ♜xe4 ♙d5

For the second time in the game Black offers a pawn, but considering the weakness of the