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1 The Zaitsev Main Line

A statistician is a person who stands with his feet in a bucket of ice water, sticks his head in an oven and says: “on average I feel fine!”.

K. DUNNIGAN

The Zaitsev Variation is among Black’s most respected Ruy Lopez lines at GM-level. Unlike some of the competing main lines it generally leads to sharp positions where Black generates counter-chances rather than seeking slow equality through simplification. With some justification it can be described as a Smyslov Variation on steroids. Black saves the move ...h6 in order to apply pressure on White’s centre as quickly as possible.

Most texts on the variation will point out that the Zaitsev has one major drawback which contrasts sharply with its general fighting qualities: it allows White to force an immediate draw (unless Black is willing to transpose to another variation). At this point we just want to state that we feel this problem has been exaggerated. A draw by repetition is after all not such a grim fate for Black, and if he really wants to, Black is certainly able to play on. We shall explore this subject in Chapters 3 and 4.

Theory books date quickly in the modern chess environment. The professional player must use an up-to-date database and put in some serious work comparing the book’s content with recent grandmaster practice. We therefore expect many of our readers to do likewise and use an analysis engine and a game database when working their way through this book. Examining recent grandmaster praxis is certainly indispensable for the serious student, and we definitely encourage this. However, the statistical functions of the database must be used with caution. Trying to base a repertoire on the statistics of a chess database is a dubious undertaking no matter how huge, recent and well-organized it is. Even if you succeed in eliminating the games of the weakest players, there still are massive problems. The main two are these:

- The correlation between the outcome of the opening struggle and the final result of the game is rather weak – in particular in rapid and amateur games.
- The refutation of a line may be represented by one single game, heavily outnumbered by older games where it succeeded due to incorrect handling by the opponents.

Only when you know the specifics of a line fairly well, can you make sensible use of the database statistics. The Zaitsev drawing line has two really significant effects on the statistics. Firstly, there is the fact that Black will usually avoid the line if he is clearly the stronger player, and needs to win. Secondly, a huge number of games where Black is slightly the stronger player end with a draw around move 12 (see Chapter 4 for more on this). That means that in the games that go on, the results might be distorted as there will be a relatively higher number of games where White is the stronger player. The net effect of these two factors is that in most full Zaitsev games, the players will either be of similar strength, or White will be clearly the stronger player. This will of course influence the statistics.

Zaitsev Overview

(1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙b5 a6 4 ♙a4 ♘f6 5 0-0 ♙e7 6 ♞e1 b5 7 ♙b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3)

For the moves up to here, see the Ruy Lopez Overview in Part 1. For the next few moves, until we reach our standard position, we shall only give very brief comments, justifying the moves somewhat without going into any details. Analytical support will follow as we first explore and then backtrack from the principal position in the following sub-chapters.

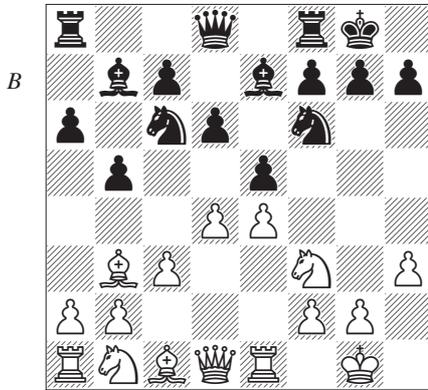
9...♙b7!

According to Mednis this is the move a man from Mars, reasonably schooled in basic opening principles and generally a good chess-player, would suggest. We may never find out if

Mednis was right, but certainly a lot of very strong earthlings have played the move. $9... \text{♖e8}$ is normally an alternative route to the Zaitsev. It does, however, have some independent significance and the differences are discussed in Line 4D.

10 d4 (D)

10 d3 leads to a position which can arise from various move-orders (among others an Anti-Marshall line) but which we examine under $9 \text{ d3 } \text{♙b7}$ in Line 6E, the Pilnik Variation. Rarer options are discussed in Line 3D.



10...♖e8!

Actually this move was Igor Zaitsev's real discovery. The reason it was never played until 1975 is probably mostly psychological: allowing White a repetition certainly feels like a slight concession. However, from a theoretical perspective a quick draw with Black is quite a success.

11 ♖bd2

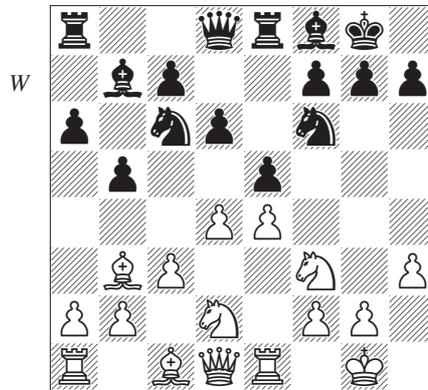
11 ♖g5 forces $11... \text{♗f8}$. It may be a draw offer or a psychological feint and is discussed in Chapter 4. 11 a4 and some minor alternatives are discussed in Line 3D.

11...♙f8 (D)

When at move 9 Fritz slightly prefers $9... \text{♘a5}$ over $9... \text{♙b7}$, it seems due to its inability to appreciate this move. However, it is really the only consistent follow-up to $... \text{♖e8}$. Now there is some real pressure against White's e-pawn, and the bishop can be activated with $... \text{g6}$ and $... \text{♙g7}$.

12 a4

This is the cutting edge of the Zaitsev Variation, and the subject of our first chapter. White



logically activates his queen's rook while attacking the weakness at b5, but the move also visibly weakens b4, which Black exploits in the main line. 12 d5 (Line 3A), 12 a3 (Line 3B) and 12 ♙c2 (Line 3C) are also very respected moves. It seems that $12 \text{ ♘g5 } \text{♗e7}$ (also 3C) is considered completely innocuous, but our analysis hints that it deserves some attention.

12...h6

Superficially the position is now reminiscent of the Smyslov Variation ($9... \text{h6}$) but there is a major difference. By delaying $... \text{h6}$, Black has generated quicker counterplay against e4, thereby making it harder for White to complete the standard knight manoeuvre to f1.

There has been some controversy whether this move really is necessary. Some very strong players have tried $12... \text{♗d7}$ with reasonable results. This is a very convenient extra line to add to your repertoire as it can also occur from the line $9... \text{♗d7}$. See the move-order $9... \text{♗d7!? } 10 \text{ d4 } \text{♗e8 } 11 \text{ ♖bd2 } \text{♙f8 } 12 \text{ a4 } \text{♙b7}$ in Line 5C for analysis. However, there can hardly be any real threats to e4 as long as White has the move ♘g5 .

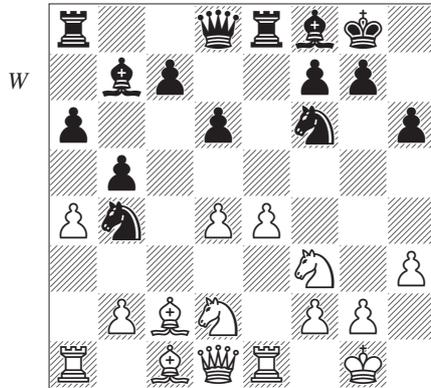
13 ♙c2

Protecting e4 with the bishop is logical now that Black has spent a move protecting f7.

13...exd4

This central exchange is the main line and very likely best. You should, however, realize that it contains a considerable strategic risk: White is left with a perfect pawn duo in the centre. It is therefore a move Black should only play when he is absolutely certain that he will have real pressure on White's centre. That is indeed the case here. In addition his problem knight gains a nice square.

14 cxd4 ♖b4 (D)



The knight can hardly be driven away from b4 and is certainly quite annoying for White on this square. Compared to the Chigorin redeployment to a5 or the Breyer undevelopment to b8, it seems a considerable improvement.

15 ♗b1

The light-squared bishop usually is worth preserving, even if the centre pawns have been blocked on light squares. Here, where the pawns are mobile, it would be a crime to give it up for a knight – even a well-placed one. In some lines White will have to work quite hard to reactivate this bishop but usually it will eventually emerge as a powerful piece.

15...c5

Black mobilizes his queenside majority and attacks White's centre before White has fully coordinated his pieces. The backward d-pawn may cause some difficulties in the long term, but for the moment isn't easy to attack. 15...♞d7 is a safe alternative which again underlines the connection to the 9...♞d7 variation. See Line 1F for details on the transposition to Line 5B.

16 d5

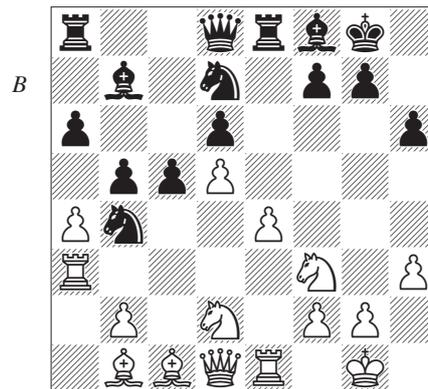
It is possible to delay or avoid this advance, but usually that will allow Black to solve all his structural problems by playing ...d5 (after a preliminary exchange on d4). See Line 1F for details.

16...♞d7!

This multi-purpose move has both defensive and offensive missions: in combination with ...g6 and ...♗g7, it exerts maximum influence on the e5-square, making a white pawn-break there extremely hard to achieve. In the

offensive department it firstly frees the f-pawn, allowing Black to undermine the spearhead of the white pawn-centre, namely the d5-pawn, with ...f5. Secondly it opens the way for the plan of ...c4 followed by ...♞c5 and occupation of the weakened d3-square, deep behind enemy lines.

17 ♖a3 (D)



This may look a little peculiar at first, but opening the a-file is quite likely to help Black's play on the queenside and obviously there is little hope of activity for the rook along the first rank. In contrast, the third rank presents the rook with a fairly open view to the kingside – in particular after White's planned ♖h2.

Just before the Turin Olympiad 2006, the Norwegian national team had a training session with Mark Dvoretsky. One of his lessons was on the subject of open files. Everyone knows that rooks belong on open files, but as Dvoretsky pointed out it's easy to forget that this rule is also valid for open ranks!

17...f5!?

The text-move will most likely lead to an exchange of Black's f-pawn for White's d-pawn. This – at least in an abstract sense – should benefit Black as he will strengthen his central influence. As compensation White will get certain attacking possibilities against the weakened black kingside. This sets the pace for the struggle ahead. Generally the play will now become very sharp. If Black prefers a different type of game, he can try 17...c4, which is considered in Lines 2A and 2B. Even though it has been played by strong players and looks reasonable enough, we shall not examine 17...g6, as after

18 ♖h2 ♕g7 19 ♗df3 it seems that White's kingside attack comes just a bit too quickly.

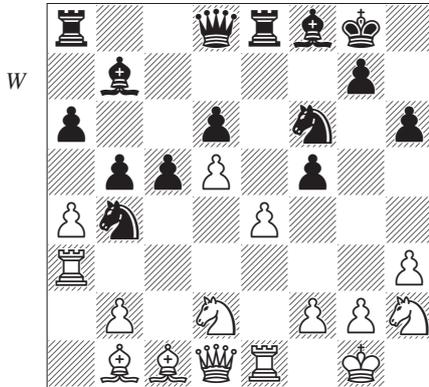
18 ♖h2

This is Khalifman's move, which he introduced against Karpov in Reggio Emilia in 1992. It is still considered White's most dangerous option here, the obvious point being the lateral transfer of the a3-rook to the kingside. Furthermore it seems almost inevitable that Black's f-pawn will be exchanged, after which g4 will be a very active square for the knight.

18...♗f6 (D)

White's last move released his control over e5, so Black decides that his knight can again be put to better use here, increasing the pressure on e4 and d5 and to some extent neutralizing White's ♗g4 plan. It is not at all unlikely that the moves up to here represent best play for both sides after 1 e4 e5 – the Open Games main line if you like. It also happens to be our 'tabiya'.

Black has also tried 18...♖h8?!, which has scored poorly and probably is too slow, 18...c4 and 18...♙e7 (see Leif's Preface).



Chapter Guide

1 e4 e5 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 ♕b5 a6 4 ♕a4 ♗f6 5 0-0 ♕e7 6 ♙e1 b5 7 ♕b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 ♕b7 10 d4 ♙e8 11 ♗bd2 ♕f8 12 a4 (12...h6 13 ♕c2 exd4 14 cxd4 ♗b4 15 ♕b1 c5 16 d5 ♗d7 17 ♙a3 f5 18 ♖h2 ♗f6)

| | | |
|----------|-----------|----|
| Line 1A: | 19 ♙f3 | 54 |
| Line 1B: | 19 ♙g3 | 60 |
| Line 1C: | (19 g4?!) | 62 |
| Line 1D: | 18 ♙ae3 | 64 |
| Line 1E: | (18 exf5) | 68 |

Line 1F: 13 ♕c2 (13...exd4 14 cxd4 ♗b4 15 ♕b1 c5 16 d5 ♗d7 17 ♗f1?!) 73

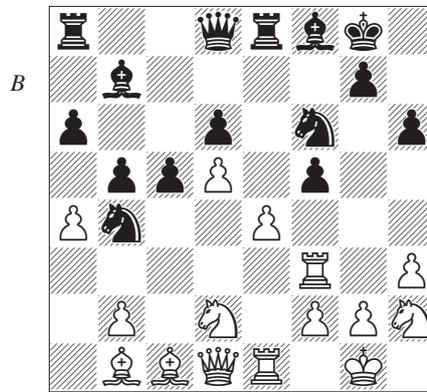
Line 1G: (12...h6 13 d5) 77

(For 17 ♙a3 c4, see Chapter 2.)

1A: Cutting Edge, 19 ♙f3

(1 e4 e5 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 ♕b5 a6 4 ♕a4 ♗f6 5 0-0 ♕e7 6 ♙e1 b5 7 ♕b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 ♕b7 10 d4 ♙e8 11 ♗bd2 ♕f8 12 a4 h6 13 ♕c2 exd4 14 cxd4 ♗b4 15 ♕b1 c5 16 d5 ♗d7 17 ♙a3 f5 18 ♖h2 ♗f6)

19 ♙f3 (D)



It is hard to say whether this is White's best, but it has clearly attracted the most attention from the top guns lately. Part of White's idea is that he would prefer the exchange of pawns to happen on e4, so that he can quickly bring his knight to e4 while opening the b1-h7 diagonal for his bishop, rather than wondering how to get rid of a white pawn on f5.

19...♙e5!

Despite its peculiar appearance, this move makes a lot of sense and can be seen as a very concrete counter-measure to White's last move. Black would like to pick up the d5-pawn without opening the b1-h7 diagonal. This is well illustrated by the recent heavyweight battle Kariakin-Bacrot, Wijk aan Zee 2006 which instead saw 19...fxe4?! 20 ♗xe4 ♗bxd5 21 ♗g4!, when Black already had problems:

a) 21...♗xe4 22 ♕xe4 ♙xe4 (22...♗c3 23 ♙xf8+ ±) 23 ♙xe4 ♗c7 24 ♗xh6+ gxh6 25 ♙g4+ +-.

b) 21...♗xg4 22 hxg4 ♙e5 23 g5 hxg5 24 ♗xc5 ♙xe1+ 25 ♙xe1 ♙e8 26 ♙xe8 ♙xe8 27 ♗xb7 ♙e1+ 28 ♖h2 ♙xc1 29 ♕a2 +-.