

Konstantin Lerner's Instructive Endgames

Yochanan Afek looks at the stylish endgame play of a former Soviet grandmaster

A YEAR HAS PASSED since Konstantin Lerner died. Originally from Ukraine, the Israeli grandmaster's death on 24 September last year, at the age of 61 following a long illness, went almost unnoticed. He was a quiet and modest person, indeed even somewhat shy, yet at least as far as his chess achievements go, he certainly deserves a bit more than just a few dry sentences barely summarising a fascinating life long career. (In fact, so do quite a few of his colleagues whose rich chess legacy is hardly mentioned in the chess media after they are gone.)

Lerner was actually one of the better Soviet players in the 1970s and 1980s. Born in Odessa on 28 February 1950, he twice won the national championship of his native country Ukraine (in 1978 and in 1982). He qualified for the grandmaster title as late as the age of 36. Very late in coming by contemporary standards, though one should not lose sight of how tough it was to obtain invitations to the handful of international events organised abroad in those days.

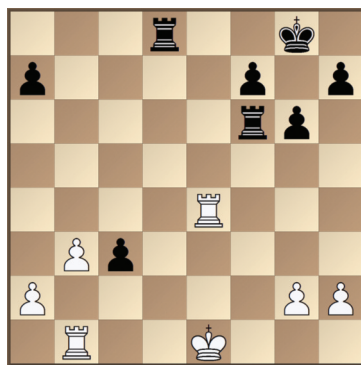
He played in several Soviet Championships, taking second place behind Andrei Sokolov at Lvov in 1984. His string of tournament victories (or shared victories) include such events as Polanica Zdrój (Rubinstein Memorial) 1985 and 1986, Tallinn 1986, Moscow 1986, Genoa 1989, Copenhagen 1990, Gausdal 1992, Nikolaev Zonal 1995, Berlin 1997, Graz 1997, Recklinghausen 1999, Bad Wörishofen 2000, Tel Aviv 2001 and 2002, Rishon Le Zion 2004, Giv'atayim 2005 and Herzlia 2005.

At the beginning of the present millennium he immigrated to Israel with his wife Sara and his son Andrei to live in the town of Hertzlia for the last decade of his life. In Israel he played for the Kfar-Saba club, which also employed him as trainer of quite a few successful junior players who went on to achieve various national team and individual titles.

Lerner played a number of exemplary

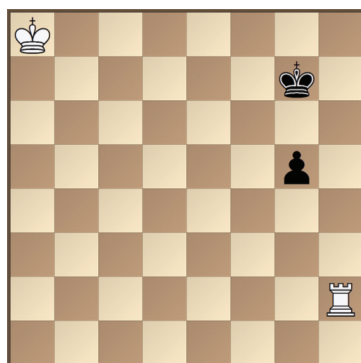
positional games, masterfully demonstrating the exploitation of small advantages. At the same time he happened to be involved in several highly instructive endings against fellow grandmasters that found their way into the standard endgame textbooks. Readers are invited to enjoy our selection – they might even prove useful in improving their endgame play.

Kiev 1978
I. Farago - K. Lerner



The black passed pawn seems quite vulnerable. But, just before falling, it decides the battle. Black played: **31...c2!** 0-1 and White threw in the towel in view of 32 Bc1 Bd1+ ! 33 Bxd1 Bf1+ !, queening. If you think 31... Bd2 looks equally strong, you are not wrong. It is just that, after 32 Bc2 , you would probably still play 32...c2 33 Bc1 Bd1+ 34 Bxd1 Bf1+ – so why postpone the inevitable?

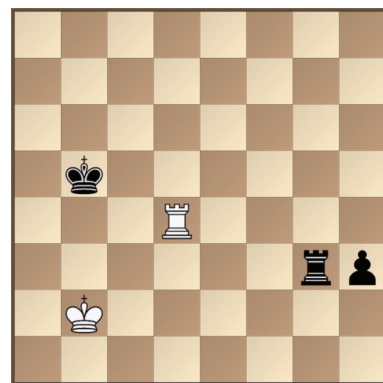
USSR Championship 1980
K. Lerner - I. Dorfman



Regular CHESS contributor Yochanan Afek at a recent tournament in the Netherlands

This minimal rook ending has become a classic and can be found in numerous textbooks. Over the board, Lerner finds the only winning move **71 Bf2!!** , expending a precious tempo for purely prophylactic purposes – preventing Black's shouldering defence well in advance, as demonstrated by the alternative attempts: 71 Bb7? Bf6 72 Bc6 Bc5! 73 Bc5 g4 74 Bc4 Bc4 and the king physically blocks the access of his white counterpart: 75 Bc3 g3 76 Bh8 g2 77 Bg8 Bf3 78 Bd2 Bf2= ; 71 Ba2? Bg6! (71... Bf6 72 Ba5!+) 72 Ba5 Bh5 73 Bb7 Bg4 74 Bc6 Bf4! shouldering! 75 Bd5 g4 76 Ba4+ Bf3 77 Bc5 g3 78 Ba3+ Bf2 79 Bf4 g2 80 Ba2+ Bf1 81 Bf3 g1 B 82 Bc3 Bh3= . The chosen text move improves on those tries by cutting off the f-file. **71... Bh6 72 Bb7 g4 73 Bc6 Bg5 74 Bd5 g3 75 Bf8 Bg4 76 Bc4 1-0**

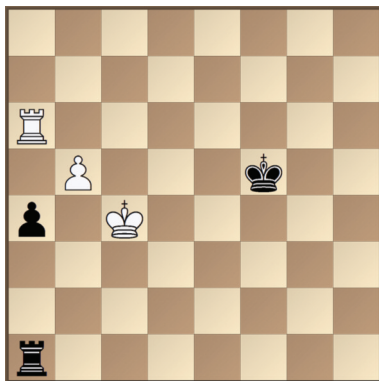
USSR Championship 1984
A. Vyzmanavin - K. Lerner



73 Bh4 Bc5 74 Bc2 Ba3 75 Bd2?? The game would have reached a basic drawn position had White continued simply

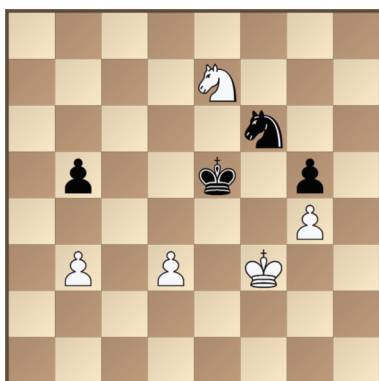
75 ♖b2! ♜g3 76 ♜c2 ♜d5 77 ♜d2 ♜a3 78 ♜e2 ♜e5 79 ♜f2 ♜f5 80 ♜g1. However, he panicked and wrongly decided to head to the other side of the board. **75...h2!** All of a sudden White is trapped by a deadly skewer on either of the lower ranks. The threat of 76...♜a1! is unavoidable. **76 ♜e2 ♜a1! 0-1**

Kutansi 1978
K.Lerner - R.Kholmov



It is "common knowledge" that all rook endings should somehow conclude peacefully, thus Black probably loses his sense of danger: **56...a3??** Surprisingly, this natural move loses. The correct continuation was 56...♜e5! 57 ♜c5 ♜c1+ 58 ♜b4 ♜d5 59 ♜xa4 ♜b1+ 60 ♜a5 ♜c5=. **57 ♜c5! a2 58 ♜b6** Finding shelter from the checks. **58...♜e4 59 ♜a5!** Or 59 ♜a3, but not 59 ♜a4+? when 59...♜d3! 60 ♜a6 ♜c3 61 b6 ♜b3 62 b7 ♜xa4 63 b8♞ ♜h1 (or any other move along the first rank) draws. **59...♜d4 60 ♜a6 1-0** Black is helpless against the white pawn's march to promotion.

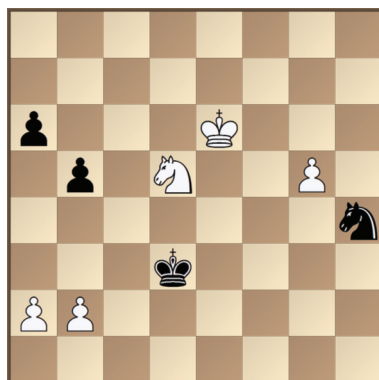
USSR Semi-Final 1981
A.Kochyev - K.Lerner



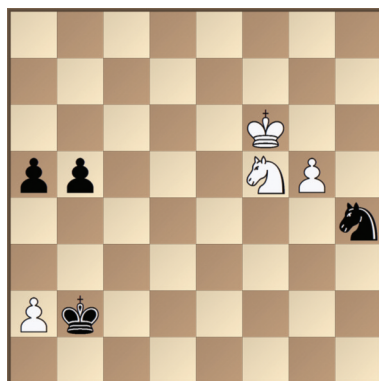
So much for rook endings. Now it's the knight's turn to show its teeth: **51...♜d4 52 ♜c6+** Black's trump in this knight ending is his powerful king, which dominates the bridge between the two flanks in the middle of the board. Nevertheless, thanks to the minimal material on the board, White could have

still saved the day had he gone for a more active defence. **52...♜xd3 53 ♜a7?** 53 b4! was correct: 53...♜c4 54 ♜e3 ♜xg4+ 55 ♜e4 ♜f6+ 56 ♜f5 g4 57 ♜f4 and Black can make no further progress. **53...b4 54 ♜c6 ♜c3 55 ♜a5 ♜d7!** **56 ♜e4** Or 56 ♜c6 ♜c5! 57 ♜e3 ♜xb3 58 ♜xb4 ♜xb4 59 ♜e4 ♜d2+ 60 ♜f5 ♜f3 61 ♜e4 ♜h4 and Black wins. **56...♜c5+ 57 ♜f5 ♜xb3 58 ♜b7** An unfortunate remote square as 58 ♜c6 would be met by 58...♜d4+ **58...♜d4+ 59 ♜xg5 ♜e6+!** A decisive intermezzo check to prevent the knight from jumping to c5. Yet, in fact, he could have allowed it too, as 59...b3 60 ♜c5 ♜e6+! 61 ♜xe6 b2 wins thanks to the deflection. **60 ♜f6 b3 61 ♜d6 b2 62 ♜xe6 b1♞ 63 ♜f6 0-1**

Moscow 1986
L.Psakhis - K.Lerner



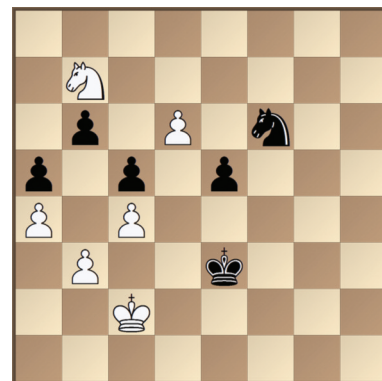
Unless there are exceptional complications, a pawn advantage in a knight ending should be sufficient to convert the win. This is the case here and Black goes for an active defence. **55...a5! 56 ♜f6 56 b4!?** axb4 57 ♜xb4+ ♜c3 58 ♜d5+ ♜b2 59 ♜c7 b4 60 ♜a6 ♜xa2 61 ♜xb4+ ♜b3 62 ♜d3 ♜c4 63 ♜e5+ ♜c5! draws. **56...♜c2 57 ♜e3+?** Missing the strong 57 b4! axb4 58 ♜e3+ ♜b2 59 ♜f5 ♜g2 60 ♜e5!, winning. **57...♜xb2 58 ♜f5**



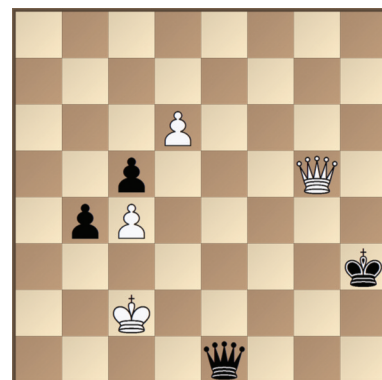
58...b4!! A surprising defence as all normal moves fail: 58...♜g2 59 ♜e5! and; 58...♜xf5 59 ♜xf5 ♜xa2 60 g6 b4 61 g7 a4 62 g8♞+ b3 63 ♜e4, winning in both

cases. **59 ♜xh4 a4! 60 g6 b3 61 a3** Or 61 axb3 a3! 62 g7 a2 63 g8♞ a1♞ 64 ♜c4 ♜a2 drawing. **61...♜c3 62 g7 b2 63 g8♞ b1♞ 64 ♜g3+ ♜d3 ½-½**

Kiev 1978
L.Alburt - K.Lerner



The last example, just for once, finds Lerner on the losing side. A bit unusual for a tribute article, perhaps, but I somehow feel that he wouldn't have objected to the inclusion of such an instructive masterpiece: the ultimate, practical demonstration of the breakthrough motif in action: **64 ♜xc5!!** A horse, a horse, my queendom for a horse! **64...bxc5** What the hell was that for? **65 b4!! axb4 65...cxb4 66 c5** and the pair of connected passed pawns proceed happily to promotion. **66 a5 e4** The knight finds it hard to cope with two remote passed pawns so Black counts on his own passed pawn instead. **67 a6 ♜f2 68 a7 e3 69 a8♞ e2 70 ♜f8** The queen ending was carefully calculated. **70...e1♞ 71 ♜xf6+ ♜g3 72 ♜g5+ ♜h3** Obeying the principle of moving the king to the edge of the board, yet here it is to no avail.



73 ♜d2! ♜a1 74 d7 ♜a2+ 75 ♜d1 ♜b3+ 76 ♜c1 ♜a3+ 77 ♜d1! ♜b3+ 78 ♜e2 ♜g4 78...♜xc4+ is met by the deadly cross-check **79 ♜d3+ 79 ♜d1** Avoiding Black's last trick: 79 d8♞?? ♜f3+ 80 ♜e1 ♜h1+ 81 ♜f2 ♜h2+ 82 ♜e3 ♜e5+ 83 ♜d3 ♜f5+ is perpetual check! **79...♜xc4+ 80 ♜e3+ 1-0**