

A FEAST OF CHESS IN TIME OF PLAGUE

CANDIDATES TOURNAMENT 2020
Part 1 – Yekaterinburg

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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 |
| = | 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 |
| △ | with the idea of |
| ▷ | better is |
| ≤ | worse is |
| N | novelty |
| + | check |
| # | mate |

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the last century tournament compilations were extremely popular. After every major chess event a compendium would appear in print. Naturally, the Candidates Tournament was no exception. For instance, David Bronstein's book "Zurich International Chess Tournament, 1953" was carefully and thoroughly studied many times in my youth. To this day I can still recite some of its more memorable passages. Gradually various textbooks and publications, but mainly theoretical manuals, completely replaced that particular type of chess literature. Nowadays even the world title match is not always worthy of its own publication. This is probably a direct result of the rapid increase in the number of international tournaments currently contested on the world circuit. The close-knit circle of leading grandmasters has turned into a sort of wandering circus troupe, globetrotting with practically the same act. One competition seamlessly transitions into the next, making it hard for the average chess fan to follow this infinite flow of events. At first the same could have been said of the 2020 Candidates Tournament. However, the balanced flow of the normal chess calendar was unexpectedly interrupted by a frightening occurrence. Seemingly harmless at first, the coronavirus pandemic overtook more and newer countries by the day and gradually became pretty much the main, and only determining factor in life. The Candidates Tournament was threatened as well. Whether it would be held at all was pretty much in doubt until the very last few minutes. Even the grandmasters, who had already gathered in Ekaterinburg, had reason to doubt that they would have a chance to sit at the boards. In the end, having indeed commenced, the tournament planted in me a vague notion of writing a book about it. The title of it was born first. It flowed naturally out of a name of one of Alexander Pushkin's four Little Tragedies "A Feast in Time of Plague." Surely, the situation in which the players would need to compete called

for some dramatic associations. Certain parties opposed to holding said tournament also used this expression implying a kind of cynicism and impropriety of celebration during such tragic times for humanity. Yet the great poet had something entirely different in mind. That particular work was written in 1830 during the second cholera pandemic and Russia was right in the midst of the suffering. Finding himself in mandatory quarantine Pushkin's little masterpiece praised the virtue of the human spirit, ready to resist any calamity or misfortune.

Your author remembers another cholera outbreak in which he was a direct participant. Chess had its role to play in that story too. News of the cholera pandemic having invaded Odessa reached me in Buenos Aires in 1970. The articles in every paper were terrifying and I was convinced that it was unlikely I would see my hometown, friends and the love of my life who would later become my wife, any time soon. Yet having concluded the tournament successfully I was surprised at the ease with which I returned to Odessa. The city greeted me in a very uncharacteristically collected and somber manner. There were no crowds of wandering tourists and the street sweepers scurried about nonstop. I had never seen such a clean and desolate summer in Odessa before or after. The natives of Odessa, normally carefree and full of life, were not despondent even in those dark times. Not many local restaurants chose to stay open in those days, even while the wine flowed like water. People enthusiastically believed the advice of doctors who claimed wine helps avoid misfortune. Today those days are long gone even if still remembered as a symbol of love of life and optimism.

As the tournament which we shall discuss commenced in such an interesting and energetic manner this timid idea of writing a book soon morphed into a very persistent desire. Therefore, the book which you are holding before you bears witness to my solidarity with my younger colleagues. The talent and bravery demonstrated by the best players in the world in this time of global calamity is a testament of their fortitude and commitment.

As usual I was assisted by my old and proven “Iron Friend” whom we otherwise know as the computer engine. Without him none of this could have ever been accomplished with such swiftness. At the same time, my silent assistant was only accountable for the pacing, whereas the bulk of responsibility regarding the quality of execution rests entirely on the shoulders of the author.

PRELUDE

The official story of the 2020 Candidates Tournament began on November the 11th, 2019 with the signing of a contract between FIDE and the Russian Chess Federation detailing the hosting duties of said tournament in Ekaterinburg from the 15th of March to the 5th of April, 2020.

At that point no one could have even imagined how difficult the road to that tournament would be nor how unexpected the outcome. Yet the significance of the actual numbers in this dramatic epic is hard to overestimate which is why the author will attempt to play the role of chronicler and try to describe as accurately as possible the key moments of this historic event.

It took over a month to finalize the list of competitors. Any doubts were eventually laid to rest in the last match of the Grand Prix tournament in Jerusalem. Ian Nepomniachtchi won the final contest against Wei Yi “on demand,” thereby guaranteeing spots in the magnificent eight both for himself and Kirill Alekseenko. Not long before FIDE had instituted the highest of qualifying standards for the wildcard spot which is a personal invitation from the organizers. The St Petersburg native was the last of the Russians meeting the criteria December 22nd, 2019.

At first it seemed that any and all subsequent events, had absolutely nothing to do with chess. On December 31st, 2019, the Chinese authorities declared a spike in a previously unknown type of pneumonia. Gradually this scourge, which soon enough came to be known as COVID-19, started appearing all over the world and bearing serious influence on the everyday lives of ordinary people. Yet for the longest time the threat seemed to be clearly blown out of proportion. Certain individual voices calling for the tournament to be postponed and held at a later time did

truthfully make themselves heard, but FIDE did not seriously consider any of it. As it normally does true thunder struck without warning. On March 6th, 2020, the official withdrawal of Teimour Radjabov and his replacement being Maxime Vachier-Lagrave was announced. As it later turned out the official statement from Radjabov arrived at FIDE's offices the previous day. It seems the ultimate chess authority did not want to ruin the mood of the author of these very words given his birthday falls on March 5th! But there had already been such a precedent in my life. Long ago in 1953 the Soviet government postponed the official announcement of the death of Generalissimo Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin from March 5th to the 6th and seemingly for the same exact reasons.

Radjabov justified his withdrawal by way of the rapid spread of the pandemic as well as the dangers and threats associated with it. He felt such conditions would strongly influence all necessary concentration and motivation critical for the maximum level of play needed in such an important competition as the Candidates Tournament. Furthermore, it could also prove to be an actual health hazard. The list of safety measures presented by FIDE proved unsatisfactory.

It is possible to argue forever about who was right in this situation. Serious points can be presented by both sides while a singular absolute truth never exists in such cases. Each person is within their right to evaluate the level of individual safety and their own boundaries of personal comfort. Personally, I believe that besides the understandable level of concern regarding his health, Radjabov's decision was influenced by other factors too. Having won the World Cup and earned a spot in the Candidates as a bonus, Teimour had already cast doubt on his participation at that point anyway.

Radjabov does not have fond memories of his involvement in the Candidates. In 2011 he ended up facing Vladimir Kramnik in a quarterfinal match. There the young Azerbaijani was competing on an equal footing with the tournament favorite. Every game of the classical portion, as well as their subsequent rapid games ended in draws. When the

match moved into the blitz Radjabov took the first game. In the second he defended confidently and was mere seconds from winning the entire match. Kramnik though, and as if almost by inertia, continued playing for the win, even if Black's defense did not require much effort.

At that point only a miracle could have saved the former world champion and the miracle came thru! Suddenly the chess clocks stopped working with the LED display simply turning off. Both players had approximately fifteen seconds left and considering the simple position the three second increment was more than enough. The break in the game lasted no less than thirty minutes. Kramnik waited in the break room the entire time entrusting his manager to deal with the judges. Radjabov on the other hand represented his own interests.

When the game continued it turned out that Kramnik was able to discover a practical chance during the break while an excited Radjabov overlooked an elementary defense. Having lost this game Teimour conceded the next one as well. With that the Azerbaijani player was eliminated from the tournament. This incident received a lot of attention and even the author, who was there in Kazan as a spectator, was deeply influenced by this dramatic turn of events. Can you imagine what it was like for Radjabov?

In London two years later Radjabov was at the very peak of his career and his rating was near the astronomical level of 2800. His play stood out for its impressive level of stability and confidence. Many considered him one of the favorites while Teimour definitely had high hopes for this event as well. Yet his performance there turned into a living nightmare. Having won his second-round game he then lost seven out of the next twelve and was unable to win any additional games.

I'm writing about these episodes in such detail as a reminder of the deep psychological scars inflicted on the young player by experience. He needed absolute calm and total concentration to try and traverse such dangerous waters. That is why even though Teimour's final deci-

sion was quite unexpected by me, the motivation behind it is actually quite understandable.

As for the replacement of participants in Candidates Tournaments, Vachier-Lagrave was not the only one to ever get this lucky. Without delving too far into history it is enough to remember the most significant cases. Botvinnik's withdrawal in '65 was reasonable: the multiple time world champion was simply tired of his never-ending struggle for the title. His replacement, Efim Geller lost the match to the eventual winner Boris Spassky. Bobby Fischer's motives for refusing to play in the 1977–78 cycle were also obvious. The World Champion, having been stripped of his title away from the board, clearly found the very idea of his invitation to a candidate's tournament downright insulting. Spassky, replaced Fischer and lost the final match to Viktor Korchnoi. While the very last case is probably one most any reader can still remember. Magnus Carlsen, who was at this point almost to the very top of Mount Olympus, unexpectedly declined to compete for the world title in 2011. His decision was motivated by principled disagreements with FIDE regarding many of the problems associated with organizing and hosting the championship itself. As we know, this did not interfere with his winning the same tournament in 2013. While two years before he was replaced by Alexander Grischuk who was ultimately defeated by Boris Gelfand in the final match. As we can plainly see those players who are added to the tournament at the very last minute do not usually finish in the back of the pack.

Radjabov's refusal caused quite the stir both among the press and on social media. Many assumed that against the backdrop of a rapidly developing pandemic it would be necessary to postpone the tournament. Others supported FIDE in its resolve to hold the event as scheduled. Furthermore, the world of professional sports had not yet taken a position regarding cancellation of events. National championships in various sporting events were still being contested. On February 22nd, a packed stadium in Milan gathered to watch the Atalanta B.C. soccer team from Bergamo take on Valencia in a Champions League clash. As it later

turned out this meeting had a fateful influence on the sudden spread of the virus in Italy and Spain. Nonetheless, on the 10th and 11th of March further league games were contested, though at that point half of them were already being played without spectators, while two other stadiums were still filled to the rafters almost as if nothing in the world had actually changed. As our chess festival drew near things suddenly took a drastic turn. All sports federations cancelled their championships and the international calendar had been postponed for an undetermined length of time. The Candidates Tournament seemed to be the only exception.

The participants all quietly gathered in Ekaterinburg. While the Russian players had no real logistical travel issues, Caruana, Vachier-Lagrave and Giri managed to make it to the event but with certain brief adventures. Things were much tougher for the Chinese Grandmasters. Russia had by that point implemented a mandatory two-week quarantine for everyone arriving from China. Wang Hao deftly avoided this obstacle by first flying to Japan in February and from there flying to Ekaterinburg. Ding Liren and his team were not as lucky in avoiding such a difficult ordeal. Despite any challenges on the day of the official opening ceremony, March 16th, all candidates were not only able to make it to the capital of the Urals but also get somewhat acclimated to the unusual atmosphere in which they would now spend the next twenty days.

Even so another misfortune struck. On the day of the opening ceremony the Ministry of Sport of the Russian Federation issued a statement cancelling all international competitions in the country for an undetermined period of time. Furthermore, as is often the case in Russia, the measures of such an announcement were to take effect immediately. If something like this had occurred anywhere else on the planet such news would, at a minimum, be a cause of confusion and alarm for the organizers. However, even as far back as the 19th century, it was the famous Russian author Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin who best formulated the brilliant method by which the many citizens of the Russian empire managed to survive: “The severity of Russian laws is alleviated by a lack of obligation in fulfilling them.” In the two centuries since that every-

day wisdom has not lost any relevance. The fierce order was easily outmaneuvered by the simple fact that the official start date of the Candidates Tournament was initially announced as March 15th thus the ban did not formally affect it. The official ceremony included all the planned pomp and circumstance. The several thousand spectators gathered in the hall were greeted by several officials associated with such a momentous event, as well as performances by a few specially invited stars from the capital. Happily, the participants were spared from attending this feast of life.

I have often pondered why the FIDE officials were so amazingly stubborn and decisive in holding the tournament as scheduled. After all it was easier and safer not to stand out from the crowd and obediently follow the general trend which is normally standard operating procedure for bureaucrats. FIDE's reaction on the other hand was more akin to an impulsive one made by a chess player who declines a simple and safe move in favor of an extremely risky continuation which will only lead to unforeseen consequences. Additionally, the risk factors did not limit themselves to situations over the board in this case. I am certainly quite far removed from the political chess kitchen which is why I can't know for certain to what degree the statement "the tournament can't be moved legally and practically" in an official response to Radjabov correlated to the actual situation. Certain supporters of postponing the tournament insisted on a deadly threat which supposedly existed for the competitors. Others lamented the fact that the lack of a familiar atmosphere would negatively influence the skills of the grandmasters and hold them back from completely opening up at the board. In response FIDE reported on unprecedented measures of safety and control. Surprisingly, neither the leadership of FIDE, nor their opponents, once mention the following serious argument especially relevant in today's dramatic circumstances. Besides the players, organizers and bureaucrats of FIDE, a closed and relatively small professional chess club, there exist millions of chess fans for whom this tournament would present a rare opportunity of distraction from a dark and hopeless reality. Under such circumstances a competition between the world's best chess players would not

only determine a challenger for a match with the world champion but by transferring it to the virtual world of chess pieces, where there is no sickness or death, many individuals would, at least for a time, feel a sense of relief. Of course, those same world-famous grandmasters would have to make certain definitive sacrifices in this case. It probably is not to everyone's taste to face hospital like sterility, while having their temperature measured daily. Yet an elite sanatorium for a select few is not a prison. Neither is it a hospital where doctors, nurses and other medical personnel perform their professional duties despite a near certain risk to their very lives. Grandmasters do not take the Hippocratic Oath but even they have certain responsibilities to society. Especially in such a critical situation when they can somehow realistically help people. Besides, chess had a unique opportunity to leave its small-town life behind and make it big on the world stage with chess players temporarily being the only soloists on this grand stage. Given the necessity of empty stadiums and concert halls the new show could have unexpectedly became popular. Chess, like no other type of sport or artform, is quite organic in fitting in with the Internet. If we were to add some live and sharp expert commentary, then under the conditions of a total lack of competition, this new intellectual spectacle could have had a certain measure of success. Guaranteeing maximum safety and optimal playing conditions for eight participants does not seem like a relatively difficult assignment. Having started on time it is far more difficult to guarantee its conclusion according to the previously announced schedule considering the competitive part that plays a decisive role in this type of show. Such a concept would have, in my view, completely justified the decision made as well as all the unavoidable risks associated with it. Yet even if such ideas were floated, they were kept as a giant secret from the wider audience.

Instead let us return to the actual chess. In discussing a completed tournament, the commentator and journalists usually emphasize the consistency and predictability of the actual results from their point of view. How even long before the start they had no doubt in the success of "X" and confidently predicted the fiasco with "Y". In order to avoid such temptations I took the liberty of recording my own predictions on

a piece of paper and promised myself to publish them no matter the results. Here now are those notes.

Conditionally the eight competitors can be separated into four pairs. The unquestionable favorites are Fabiano Caruana and Ding Liren. Much can be said in favor of this prediction. Fabiano, having won brilliantly at Wijk aan Zee, has closed in on the perpetual rating leader Carlsen. Contributing to this argument are also many other tournament victories as well as his experience in participating in previous Candidates Tournaments.

Ding is at a slight disadvantage compared with the American in this regard, even if his potential to grow is far greater. Partly it is also because his opening repertoire, both in terms of its width and depth, does not correlate to the level of an elite player which he undoubtedly happens to be. Since Liren missed some of the traditional tournaments at the beginning of this year, it seems certain that he devoted that free time to the opening. Considering this, I would even go so far as to place him ahead of Caruana as my pick.

The next duo is comprised of two grandmasters who bear a striking similarity to each other. In fact, it would not be a stretch to consider them chess brothers. Ian Nepomniachtchi and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave are fellow peers and contemporaries. Both play very appealing and dynamic chess and their opening repertoire is surprisingly similar. Both MVL and Ian are not lacking when it comes to brilliant victories, yet this is the first time either will participate in this event. It is precisely that lack of experience at this the highest level, as well as a certain degree of impulsiveness and emotion, inherent in both, which could interfere with them offering a worthy challenge to the clear favorites.

On the other hand, Alexander Grischuk, and Anish Giri are almost polar opposites. If the Dutchman flies over the opening stage on autopilot, the Russian leaves the lion's share of his time and energy in it. For that reason, Alexander's play at the end of the first-time control tends to

have a very erratic and impulsive character even if Anish cannot be considered beyond reproach in this stage of the game as well. I think these weaknesses in their play, which it seems have already become chronic, will interfere with their ability to battle for top honors.

Finally, we come to Wang Hao and Kirill Alekseenko who both punched a ticket to Ekaterinburg through the Isle of Man Grand Swiss tournament and are, relatively speaking, the weakest of the candidate eight.

All the above seemed quite reasonable to the Oracle himself. Nevertheless, the final verdict on my competency shall only be pronounced upon the conclusion of the tournament itself.

Come what may, it began on schedule.

THE PLAY

The next day the tournament finally commenced.

ROUND 1 March 17th, 2020

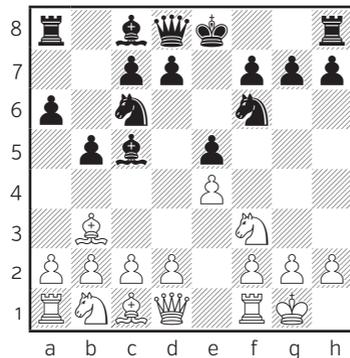
1

-
- ▷ **Maxime Vachier-Lagrave [2767]**
▶ **Fabiano Caruana [2842]**
FIDE Candidates [1], 17.03.2020

This initial meeting between two old foes was cause for increased interest. One earned the right to compete at the Candidates 2020 two years earlier by winning a similar tournament in Berlin. The other reached the Candidates for the very first time at the last possible moment thanks to unexpected and completely unforeseen circumstances. From a chess point of view this could only mean that Caruana had an opportunity

to engage in deep and purposeful preparation, while his opponent was required to do a “cold reading.” On the other hand, MVL’s opening repertoire is so limited that he didn’t need much time in order to prepare for the tournament and really only had to refresh his old files.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4
♘f6 5.0–0 b5 6.♙b3 ♙c5



This variation has served Caruana faithfully for many years even if it later left his repertoire for certain inexplicable reasons. Lately Fabiano has returned to the habits of his youth. Perhaps with the help

of his coaching staff he was able to plug certain existing theoretical holes.

7.a4 ♖b8

After 7... ♗b7 8.c3 d6 and with a transposition of moves we would have had the same position as in the game Vachier-Lagrave — Caruana, GCT, Zagreb 2019, in which the American came out on top.

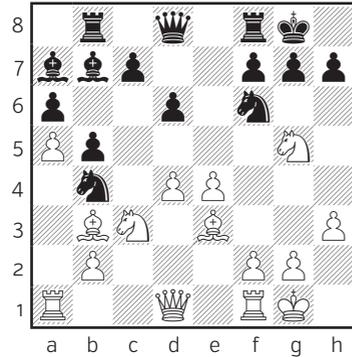
8.c3 d6 9.d4 ♗b6 10.a5

An alternative to the older and more well known 10.axb5 axb5 11.♖a3 o-o 12.♖xb5 ♗g4 which occurred, for instance, in Kovalev V. — Caruana, Tata Steel 2020, the last tournament for Caruana before the Candidates. Fabiano succeeded there as well.

10... ♗a7

Practically forced since 10... ♗xa5 11.d5 is really bad while in case of 10... ♖xa5 11.♞xa5! ♗xa5 12.dxe5 ♖xe4 (Not much better is 12...dxe5 13.♞xd8+ ♖xd8 14.♖xe5.) 13.♞d5 ♗e6 14.♞xe4 ♗xb3 15.♖d4 Black loses another piece.

11.h3 o-o 12.♗e3 exd4 13.cxd4 ♖b4 14.♖c3 ♗b7 15.♖g5!?



It seems MVL's precise knowledge of the position is over since he spent twenty minutes on this well-known and probably strongest move.

Quite possible is 15.♞e1 but in this case White would need to contend with 15... ♗xe4! (Significantly weaker is 15... ♖xe4? 16.♖xe4 ♗xe4 17.♗d2 ♗xf3 18.♞xf3 c5 19.♞ad1! with a dangerous initiative for White.) 16.♗g5 (16.♖xe4 ♖xe4 17.d5 ♗c5! 18.♗d4 ♞e8 occurred in Kevlishvili — Firouzja, Reykjavik 2019. White does not have enough compensation for the pawn.) 16... ♗g6

[Decent is also the simple 16... ♗xf3 17.♞xf3 h6 18.♗h4 (18.♗xf6

♖xf6 19. ♖xf6 gxf6 20. ♜e7 ♜xd4 21. ♜xc7 leads to equality) 18...d5 with good chances to equalize.]

17. ♘e4 ♜xe4 18. ♜xe4 h6 19. ♜xf6 ♖xf6 20. ♖d2 c5 21. ♜ae1 White has the initiative which fully compensates for the pawn. Interesting too is 15. ♖b1 keeping tension on the board. Maxime probably contemplated all these possibilities while thinking over his move.

15... ♖e7

The aggressive knight lunge did not surprise Caruana. This move, like each of the previous ones, was played very quickly. It should be noted that this natural response by Black, strange though it may seem, is actually a novelty. Seen earlier were only 15...c5 and 15...♖e8. In the first case very unpleasant is 16.e5!

After 15... ♖e8 16.e5 dxe5 17.dxe5 ♖c6 (17... ♜xe3 18. ♘xf7 ♜xf7 19. exf6 ♜c5 20. ♜e1 ♖f8 21. ♘e4 ♜xe4 22. ♜xe4 The engine also evaluates this as favoring White) 18. ♘f3 ♜xe3 19. fxe3 ♘e4 20. ♖d4 ♘xc3 21. ♖xb4 White obtained the advantage in the game Sasikiran — Moroni, Gibraltar 2020. There is no reason to

doubt that all of these possibilities were thoroughly analyzed by Caruana at home.

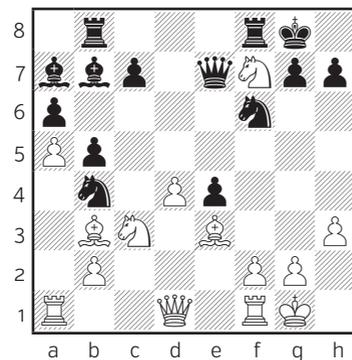
16.e5 dxe5

Possible too was 16... ♘fd5 17. ♖b1 g6 18. exd6 cxd6 but Black follows an intended line.

17. ♘xf7

In case of 17.dxe5 ♜xe3 18. exf6 ♖xf6 19. ♘xf7 ♜a7! Not even one of the many discovered checks gives White an advantage.

17...e4!



Precisely the coolheaded answer which guarantees Black an equal game. The amount of discovered checks could make one's head spin but not a one of them leads anywhere.