

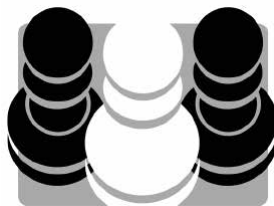
# The Mental Game

The Struggle of Chess Improvement

by

**Alexander Galkin**

with game annotations by Jacob Aagaard



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# Contents

	Key to Symbols Used	4
	Publisher's Foreword	5
	About the Author	8
	Introduction	9
1	Unfinished Journeys of Self-improvement: First Stage (Aug. – Dec. 2015)	11
2	Second Stage (January – June 2016)	35
3	Third Stage (August 2016 – January 2017)	119
4	World Champion!	201
	Appendix A – Recent Games and Puzzles	259
	Appendix B – Exercises	271
	Appendix C – Solutions	275
	Appendix D – Additional Messages from Trainer to Student	281
	Name Index	286

# Publisher's Foreword

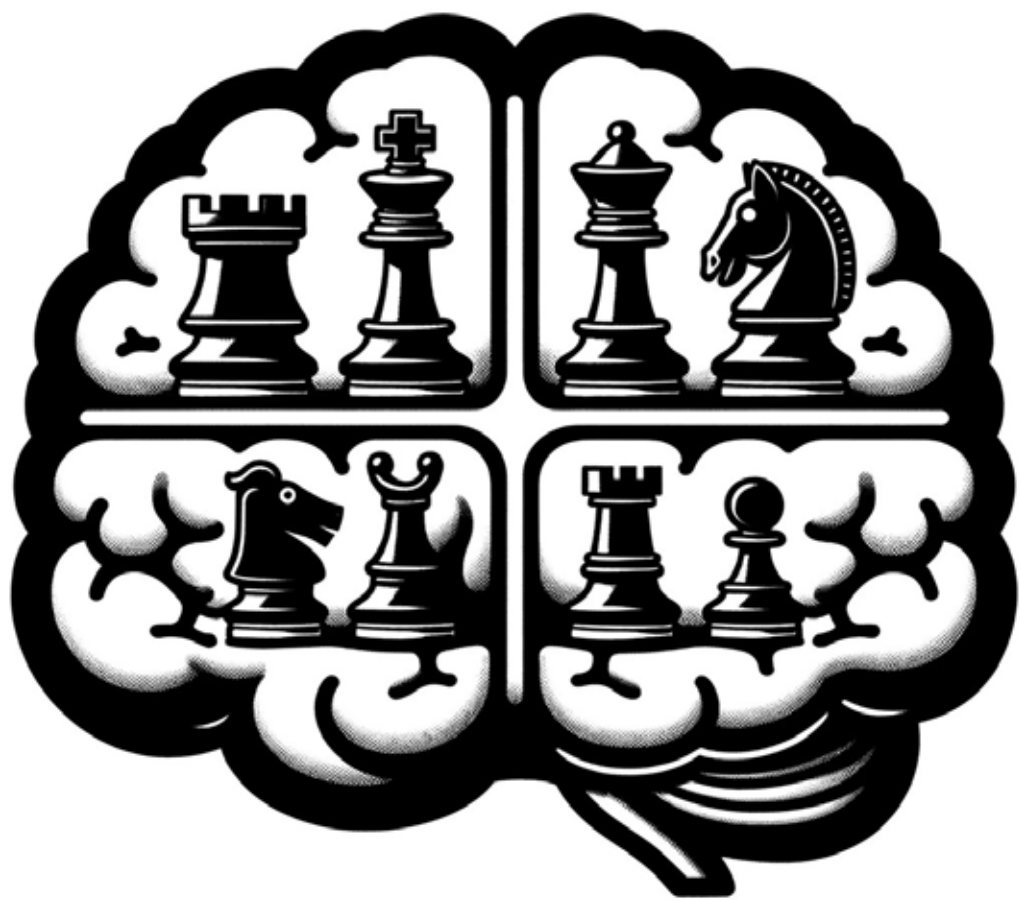
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*The Mental Game: The Struggle of Chess Improvement* is not the title used by the version of this book published in Russian in 2019, but we feel it is a better reflection of the contents and aims of the book compared with *Profession Coach: Actual Problems of Practical Work*. The book is written from the perspective of Alexander Galkin. As can be seen from the *About the Author* section, he has significant experience both as a strong grandmaster and as a trainer of junior talents. It describes and analyses the period between August 2015 and January 2017 when he was the trainer to one of those talents, who was born in 2002: Aleksandra Maltsevskaya, a player now representing Poland.

Maltsevskaya was a promising junior when Galkin became her trainer, and the book covers her further significant successes during their period of working together. Whilst these are interesting and instructive by themselves, these features of the book are further enhanced by the fact that this period was not all about celebrating victories; there are also valuable lessons to be learnt from things that didn't go so well. The author doesn't shy away from these. And even more importantly, this period must have had an influence on her becoming a World Champion in the following year, when she won the World Junior Girls Championship in Gebze, Turkey in 2018.

So, what does this book have to offer? At its most basic level, it is a chronological account of the period of 18 months of the tournaments played by Maltsevskaya and the related training work done with Galkin. But it is much more than a mere chronicle of events. There is also a considerable amount of explanation and analysis of the practical events which took place, such that there are numerous lessons contained within it for a player who is on the path of development and improvement. It covers from both a practical and theoretical perspective the process of working with a trainer and working on your own to improve. And these lessons have an excellent track record, as Maltsevskaya went on to become a World Champion!

It might be helpful to indicate a few of the many pointers within these pages on how to improve your results, all illustrated in a practical context. As you would expect from the title of the book, many of these are to do with psychology, but they are by no means limited to those aspects. For example, how often a keen improving player should play. How to study and prepare openings for specific opponents. How to regard each game in a tournament on its own merits. How to deal with nerves, particularly after a bad loss. How to play against and learn from stronger opponents. How to play in the crucial last round of a tournament. What to do during a tournament. How to identify things that went wrong and how to learn from them. How to communicate between a trainer and player. How to interact between trainer and player in the context of parents and a wider team. How to learn from other sports...



As shown by Galkin's preface to the Russian edition of this book, he considers the work to have a wider application in sports psychology to activities other than chess. But in our view, he also underestimates the importance of the book to the player, emphasizing instead the perspective of the trainer.

Here is the Preface to the earlier edition:

“The present teaching handbook contains a large body of theoretical and practical information concerning work with young people of high sporting calibre. The aims include improving the command of educational psychology among chess trainers and young teachers of sporting disciplines in higher education institutions. The material presented here is subject to adaptation with a view to devising your own individual coaching method for work with young high-calibre pupils.

“The book is intended for postgraduates, teachers in higher education and sports trainers; it may also perhaps be of use to the parents of young sporting competitors.”

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The book has been enhanced over the earlier edition in several ways. In particular, the most interesting and instructive games and game fragments from the period when Galkin was Maltsevskaya's trainer have been included, with key comments and analysis made by Jacob Aagaard in his signature style. These also give further colour to the descriptions of the games provided by the author. And her games are very entertaining as she has an aggressive and uncompromising style of play. The tactical blows are complemented with instructive comments on how and why the play could be improved. The narrative which covers this period has been edited and tightened (although we have seen fit to retain the wording in full of the various written messages between the two where these are given, as it is important to see what was said at the time). Given the significance of Maltsevskaya becoming a World Champion only in the year after their work together ended, we have also included a chapter on her win in that tournament, including an analysis of all her games from that event. Furthermore, we have added an appendix of a few of her recent games along with some puzzles to solve from her recent tournaments. Amruta Mokal has kindly given us permission to include photos she took at the 2018 Junior World Championship, and we have even included a few images generated by AI. And John Sugden has performed an admirable translation of the book into English.

We hope you enjoy this book, seeing the lessons learnt by a swashbuckling young player on her route to the summit of the chess world!

Jeremy Hart  
Bristol, March 2024

# Introduction

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On starting work with a talented and promising young player who has already scored a good national or international result, a trainer will want to go from strength to strength with this pupil. But beneath the surface he will always feel a little apprehensive. A great success may not eventually be achieved. In that case, no matter what the reasons may be, cracks are bound to appear in the relationship between player and trainer. The player will then justifiably find another trainer, and the trainer should accept this. The value of a successful sporting career for the player should greatly outweigh any grudge or possible material losses by the trainer.

Work with such promising young players gives a trainer plenty of scope for self-education. For example, perfecting the method of processing information and presenting it, and of organizing the preparatory work before a tournament. For these opportunities, I am grateful to those I have worked with – irrespective of whether we managed to achieve everything we intended. I have sought to teach them, and they have taught me. The message from this is to work hard and keep going in the hope of victory.

The basis of this book is to examine aspects of my work with a young girl, Aleksandra (Sasha) Maltsevskaya, during almost a year and a half – by tournament and championship and spanning successes and failures. Through the eyes of a trainer, I have tried to set down everything that might help young players to gain good competitive results. This includes the errors and shortcomings of both me and my student, although an amicable and positive tone is adopted throughout. I have tried to be as objective as possible and to conceal nothing. The text was at least partially written during our work together, so I am confident it represents what really happened rather than a misremembered interpretation of it after the event.

Whilst this is a chronological account, it is not written as a diary. The form of the book is based on my thoughts and understanding as a high-ranking chess player and skilled trainer.

One of the important threads that runs through the book, and connects its parts, is the psychology of both sport and interrelationships. You cannot achieve great results without coping with the psychological pressure before and during a tournament, and without basic discipline in working with the trainer. Another important condition for success by a young player is a constructive and working relationship between the trainer and the child's parents. There must be no parental jealousy towards the trainer; there must be mutual respect. Clearly any conflicts, however minor, between the various parties can hinder fruitful co-operation between the trainer and the player.

The aspects of a trainer's and pupil's work that this book examines are usually presented for public judgement with some reluctance. It is viewed as specific and internal to the trainer and player relationship. My association with other trainers and fellow grandmasters confirms this. Therefore, whilst the book includes games and game fragments which are helpful and interesting illustrations of the points being made, its primary focus is not on matters such as specific opening variations. Nevertheless, my (possibly naive) view is that the information in the book may be useful for developing the science of coaching and may also help trainers and specialists on various levels to find their own answers to specific professional questions. The more information, the greater the possibilities for processing it and drawing appropriate conclusions.



## Prague – European Girls Championship

The time arrived for the vitally important European Championship. All tournaments are important, of course (ratings, money prizes, etc.), but the official ones – Russian, European and World Championships – take pride of place. Titles are at stake, and with them come invitations and the material means to participate in them.

The outward appearance was that we hadn't come to the tournament in the best possible shape. Sasha's atrocious play at Taganrog, as well as her dreadful start in Moscow (partly rectified by her final stint) didn't inspire optimism. However, I knew Sasha's ability to rise to the occasion at crucial moments, as well as her violent swings in form. So as her trainer I was hopeful for a good performance. Sasha and I had talked for many hours about her problems during the Moscow tournament. Sasha was not a very communicative person and she found it difficult to formulate her thoughts into words. But from asking her concrete questions I managed to gain specific information which in my view explained a whole range of negative influences on her results. We talked over the problem productively and decided what had to be done to stop it from occurring.

The first round and Sasha was top of the starting list. The round was to start at 16.00 Moscow time. Planning our work according to Moscow time was easier, as long as there was a good internet connection. We began our session in the morning. We didn't yet know the name of Sasha's opponent. After words of greeting and my question "are you ready to fight for the top honours?" (the answer was "I am"), I said the following:

"The tournament will be a difficult one. You need to put everything you've got into it – right from the start. Get in the right frame of mind. Require your mind and body to keep up the concentration, all the way through the game. Calculate, calculate. At the same time you need to have faith in yourself, so as not to get yourself into time scrambles. Don't waste time over any fears. Fight to the end. But in doing so, don't consider any nonsense such as sacrifices that aren't justified. You must play in keeping with the position. Look for your chances. And they will turn up. As long as you're in good form, you play better than the others. But you need to prove it in every game. So you need to *find* your top form, and the attitude that goes with it, for this crucial contest. Don't be sidetracked by any stuff that isn't to do with it. The tournament and nothing else! The chessboard and nothing else. Every game is of the utmost importance. You must take a professional approach to the tournament and do a high-quality job. There are nine clashes ahead of you. And each one is of the utmost importance. You've got to understand that and put into it all the effort that your fighting spirit and constitution are capable of. No relaxation.

"But at the same time don't overstrain yourself. There's no use in that. Good spirits, concentration, good calculation and confidence in yourself – those are the components of success.

"And that's how you've got to approach the tournament."



We went on to discuss the technical part of our work for the new tournament. We then cleared up the backlog of work on the openings left over from the previous event. I had prepared the material in advance and now explained some aspects of piece deployment and associated plans. This didn't take long and the draw still wasn't available.

I had to go away for a few hours to the courtroom where I was representing an individual in a case against a pension fund. Returning from the court, I discovered that Sasha was paired against a Polish girl. We ran through her games in the database. It was the first round, and there was a large difference in their ratings, but the game still had to be approached responsibly.

I discussed the following approach with Sasha and prepared her for it psychologically from the start. We did not have a nine-round tournament, we had nine separate tasks. Each game was to have a specific goal and be without reference to the preceding or following games. This approach would help us to mitigate any negative effects from games that went before and would not permit relaxation in the concluding rounds.

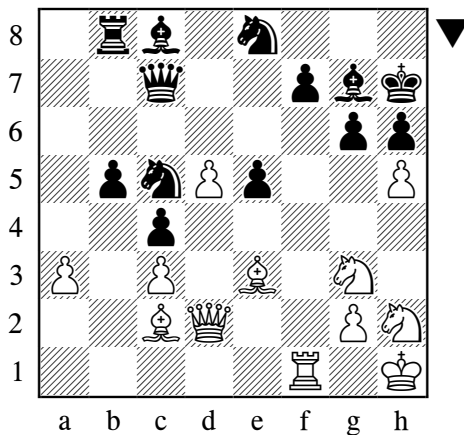
Previously we had only used this system when a reversal occurred. But previous experience was that a crisis was likely to arise, so it made sense to anticipate this and adopt the approach from the start of the event.

What I have just said could of course be viewed with scepticism. The player may only be interested in the concrete chess-related part of the preparation – what to play and how to handle a specific position. But the maximum improvement in a player's competitive results also needs consideration of tournament strategy and sports psychology. This includes the methodology of the training process and for processing chess information in the most productive way.

We prepared some possible opening lines. This first round proved to be no walkover. The opponent had prepared a scheme she had played before. The closed type of position did not suit Sasha's style, although she had already played a few games with the variation, even in that same year. I thought we had examined, and concluded on, aspects of the position in detail. But this was not demonstrated in the game, with the advantage being lost after some odd moves and jumping from one plan to another. Sasha then launched a storm of activity. This was unsound, but her opponent failed to find the refutation and allowed tactical possibilities. This is where we pick up on the action below. Her opponent again did not find the best defence, and Sasha broke through to her king. The Polish girl resigned when faced with mate in two.

Aleksandra Maltsevskaya – Zuzanna Kulpa

Prague 2016



32...♘f6?

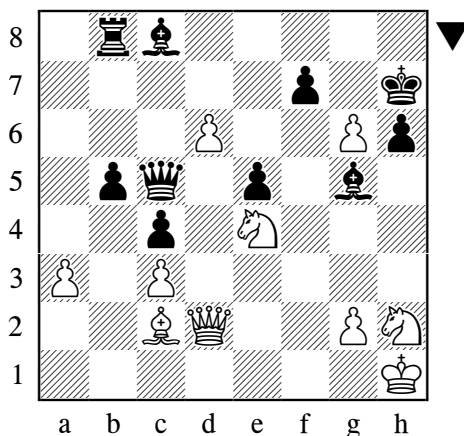
32...♘d3! would have blunted the white attack, leaving Black with a significant edge.

33.d6 ♖c6 34.♙xc5 ♜xc5 35.♝xf6 ♙xf6 36.♘e4?!

The wrong move order.

36.hxg6† fxg6 37.♘e4 would transpose to the game.

36...♙g5 37.hxg6†



37...fxg6?!

Black could have created a lot more difficulties with: 37...♔g7!, when after 38.♖xg5 (38.♗xg5? hxg5 39.d7 ♕xd7 40.♖xd7 ♗f2! would give Black enough counterplay to make the draw.) 38...hxg5 39.♗xc5 ♖a8 White now has to play accurately to keep full winning chances. When you know the moves, they look logical; but so do a lot of other possibilities. 40.gxf7 ♖xa3 41.♗f3 ♕xf7 42.♗xe5† ♔g7 43.♗c6! ♖xc3 44.♗b4! White should win, but there is a long way to go. Note that three minor pieces against the rook is a draw.

38.♗xg5† hxg5 39.d7 ♕xd7 40.♖xd7† ♕h6 41.♗g4†

Black is mated.

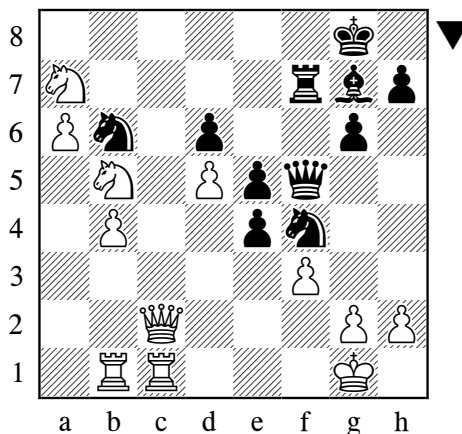
1–0

In Round 2 we had Black against a Slovakian. We gathered from the database that she was an experienced girl who had repeatedly appeared in World and European Girls' Championships. We discussed Sasha's previous game. I complimented her on her victory (she needed to have confidence in her powers) but reproached her for her opening play. We went on to prepare for the second round in the usual way, having looked at her opponent's games in advance.

In the game, Sasha's opponent used a rare continuation new to Sasha, who didn't react in the best way. She came out of the opening a pawn down and with the worse position. Then she also had to give up the exchange, and the situation became hopeless. But again, Sasha showed her ability to generate threats. The Slovakian girl relaxed and fell into a trap; she was forced to resign one move before suffering a smothered mate. This was the denouement:

### Dominika Ferkova – Aleksandra Maltsevskaya

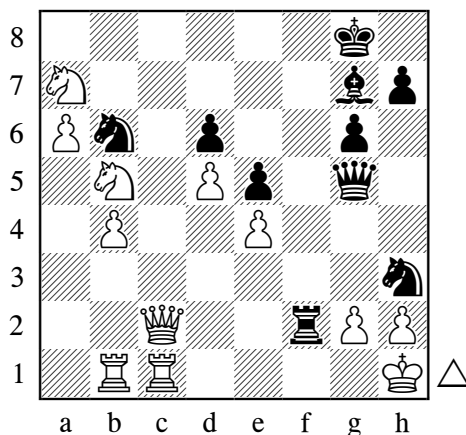
Prague 2016



28...♖g5 29.fxe4??

White was winning after something like: 29.♔h1!?

29...♗h3† 30.♕h1 ♖f2!



Maybe White believed it would be a perpetual and was OK with it. But now she is faced with utter destruction.

31. ♖xf2 ♜xf2† 32. ♔g1 ♕e3 33. ♝e1 ♜h3† 34. ♔h1 ♖g1†  
0–1

A stroke of luck. Sasha had also fought stubbornly in a critical situation, but the quality of her play was still poor. I had been aware for a long time that Sasha often had difficulty running herself into form in a tournament and was trying to remedy it.

We prepared Sasha as White against another Polish player in the third round. Considering the uneasy start to the tournament, I had another talk with Sasha about tournament strategy:

“You’ve got another one-game task ahead of you. You must fulfil it like a professional.

“You must come out of the opening with a normal position and play your own game. Don’t be afraid of anyone or anything. Have faith in yourself and don’t let anything distract you. Calculate, concentrate. Don’t do anything hasty, but don’t sit there dithering idly either.

“I repeat, have faith in yourself and your moves. You’re obviously the stronger player. But once again you’ve got to prove it. That’s what you’ve got to do in each new game.”

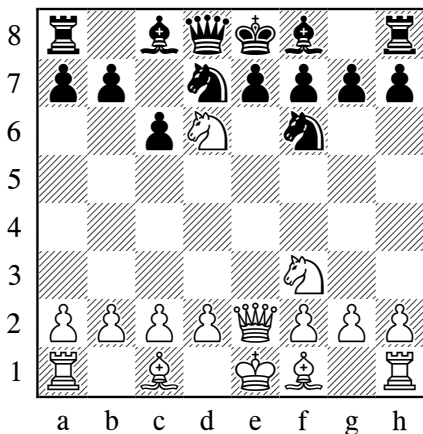
Sasha then went to work independently, preparing for the game on the lines we had set out. Two hours before the start of the round, I came back to her on the net. By that time some questions might have cropped up, demanding answers. But she didn’t have any questions, so I just wished her success.

The game was an ultraminiature – checkmate in six moves. There was an element of chance, of course. The opponent went into an opening that was new to her. Sasha responded with a rare variation that we had looked at before; she had even played it before, but only in a rapid game that didn’t get into the databases. Confronted with a type of position which was unfamiliar, her opponent immediately fell for a well-known trap:

### Aleksandra Maltsevskaya – Michalina Rudzinska

Prague 2016

1.e4 c6 2.♘c3 d5 3.♗f3 dxe4 4.♗xe4 ♘f6 5.♕e2 ♗bd7 6.♗d6#



1-0

Sheer luck you might think, but we had worked at studying the variation, and the mate was a by-product of this variation. Any homework well done will bring a suitable result – sometimes such an amusing mate. An odd thing is that Sasha’s opponent resigned two moves before the mate in Round 1, and one move before the mate in Round 2 – and in Round 3 the mate took place for real. A coincidence?

It was good to have gained such an easy win, but there was a danger that such a gift might cause Sasha to relax. Before the next round I made this point:

“Mind you don’t relax a lot. You’ve had some luck of course – though there *was* some merit of our own in it. We had prepared that rare variation. The conclusion is, don’t do anything hasty and don’t lose your concentration. I repeat, you’ve been lucky, and we’ve taken the next step. Another part of our work is done, another task has been carried out. Forget that now, clear it out of your head. There’s a new task before you. Don’t take any notice of people around you sneering ‘fluke’ and ‘some have all the luck’. Let me repeat, that stretch has been travelled. That slice is cut off. It’s all starting again – there’s a fresh task to accomplish.”

We prepared for the fourth round, Sasha with Black against a Serbian player. Both players had started the tournament with three wins, so no easy ride was expected. Sasha decided what opening to play, as she did in most cases. I would give her as much information as possible on her opponent’s openings and would give her my thoughts before she made her decision. This was important as she was learning to take responsibility for her own decisions. If she could not decide, I would state my preference – though there were some cases where Sasha still chose something other than my recommendation. I consider this a normal working process.

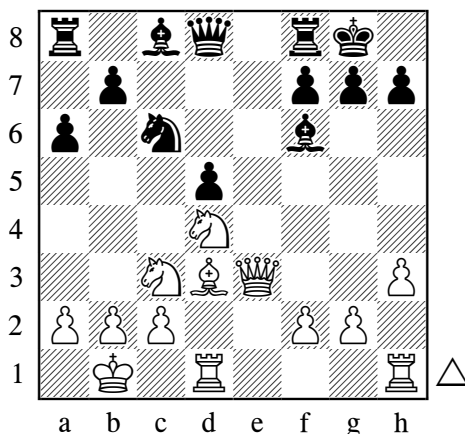
We went over some specific variations. We agreed that I would come back a couple of hours before the round, as on the previous day, and if there were any questions, we would discuss them. Sasha then began her independent work on preparing for the game.

There was a question. But instead of waiting for me to look at her scheme and give my recommendation, Sasha said she had considered everything for herself already. From this I understood that that she was highly stressed. I told her not to worry and to relax before the game. I assured her that her variation was not going to occur, as it wasn't in her opponent's style.

Sasha won the game fairly comfortably as Black. This inspired optimism before the games against her main rivals. Naturally, the line that had worried her was not played. It was her first good game in the tournament. Black was already doing well out of the opening, but a dubious decision by White on her 14th move gave Sasha a chance to wrap the game up quickly:

### Katarina Nestorovic – Aleksandra Maltsevskaya

Prague 2016



14. ♖ce2?

The wrong way to deal with the threat to the d4-knight.

14. ♖f3 with some problems was better.

14... ♗xd4 15. ♗xd4 ♖e8! 16. ♗f4 ♗e5

Repeating once, to show control.

17. ♗e3 ♗f6 18. ♗f4 g5!

Winning a piece.

19. ♗f3 ♗xd4 20. ♗xh7 † ♗xh7 21. ♖xd4?

White is also lost after 21. ♗xf7 † ♗h6 22. h4 g4 23. ♖xd4 ♗e6, but it had to be tried.

21... ♗e6+

Black won after another 14 moves.



Maltsevskaya with her mother