Nimzovich's
My System

FastTrack Edition

Edited by

Alex Fishbein

Foreword by Vassilios Kotronias

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Cover by Molly Scanlon

Printed in the United States of America

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Preface to the *FastTrack* Edition

I first read *My System* as an eight-year-old, growing up in the Soviet Union. The book quickly became woven into the fabric of my being. *My System* formed the primary basis of my chess understanding for many years.

But after I came to the United States at the age of 11, I was surprised to learn that many adults had found the book hard to read. It was only much later that I understood why.

That Russian version that has traveled with me all my life was created in the 1920s by the Soviet chessplayer and writer Ilya Maizelis. He worked together with Nimzovich on the Russian translation from the original German, and the author of *Mein System* approved the first Russian edition. It was much more than just a direct translation. Maizelis's genius (I do not use this term lightly) was to adapt the author's uniquely colorful style of writing to blend in seamlessly with the chess-specific analysis, while making the work timeless by removing those passages that would be unlikely to survive cultural changes.

The more recent English translations, each good in its own way, similarly tried to improve readability. The late Robert Sherwood's version, published in the last decade, brought back the most authentic Nimzovich by sticking closest to the original. But as more time has passed and as study methods have changed, the book has become problematic for reasons other than just the language or metaphors used. *My System*, the book that I (and many other people of my era) worshipped, is now deemed not quite suitable for chess education, and valuable mostly as a historical document. I felt the need to somehow fix this.

The complaints about *My System* fall into the following categories:

(1) The presentation is too dense. Many sections force the reader through too many words before getting to the chess. Lengthy verbal explanations of strategies without a visual aid (a chess game or position) are not appropriate for the computer age.

(2) Nimzovich spends a lot of time talking about the history of development of his own theory. All the arguments he had with Tarrasch might be intriguing for those interested in how chess has progressed through time, but they do nothing to help the student learn positional play.

(3) The author sometimes gets carried away with his novel ideas. Some of his own games in the book purport to illustrate the theme, but in fact are decided by a blunder by the opponent, rather than any grand strategy.

(4) While most strategic conceptions are valid, a few need to be revised. Overprotection is the best example of an idea that is viewed differently today.

(5) Opening theory has advanced dramatically since then. Most of the opening advice in the book should not be followed.

(6) Some allegories, analogies, and jokes are hard to understand today.

To my chagrin, I agree with all of these complaints. I am indebted to Ben Johnson and Christof Sielecki for their brilliant exposition of many of these thoughts in Book Recap #18 on the *Perpetual Chess Podcast*, aired in 2021.

It is a long list. A mere retranslation cannot solve these problems. So I decided on a different tack: to try to create the best of both worlds by producing something that remains Nimzovich but throws away what is no longer relevant. Let me explain how I addressed the two broad areas: (1) style of presentation, and (2) chess content.

(1) Style of Presentation
The best of Aron Nimzovich's prose is, indeed, poetry. His many analogies (such as calling the passed pawn "a dangerous criminal") give you the kind of imagery that not only helps you understand the key concepts, but also, much more importantly, leaves you with an everlasting love for the game. These images make *My System* an all-time classic. In this *FastTrack* translation, I tried to keep the best of Nimzovich's language. If some of

the metaphors do not make sense today, I tried to slightly modify them without changing the meaning. I tried not to make this a literary or philosophical puzzle book, however.

By examining the German original or the Sherwood translation, the interested reader will find that the author had ideas inspired by economics, politics, and Hegelian idealism. We cannot forget that *My System* was written during a time of great social upheaval in many parts of the world. I tried to use language that makes sense 100 years later and is accessible to young readers.

My choices of what words to use, and what analogies to keep, modify, or remove, were without a doubt the hardest decisions. Only the readers can judge how sound these choices were.

The historical references to how Nimzovich's System was conceived and the arguments with the "pseudo-classical" school have been almost entirely removed. *FastTrack* is meant to be an instruction manual and not a history book (although the number of iconic games probably makes it a historical document, too).

The organization of the material also saw major changes. The reader will find a slightly different set of chapters here than in the original. Games and comments sometimes migrated from a different chapter of the original (and occasionally even from other Nimzovich books). Sometimes this was necessary because of the chess content issues described below, and sometimes for readability. But every game and illustration came from Nimzovich.

The reader will find much fewer lengthy explanations without illustration. Nimzovich often put the illustrative games at the end of chapters. *FastTrack* moves them as near as possible to the corresponding verbal descriptions. For example, the illustrative games to the first three chapters were after the end of the third chapter in *My System*, but they are interspersed among the three chapters in *FastTrack*.

The biggest changes are in the second part of the book, "Positional Play." Some of the topics here are difficult enough without the lofty language. *FastTrack* leaves intact the author's more direct descriptions and tries to properly illustrate every positional idea. Most of Nimzovich's theoretical content, which I continue to think is indispensable for learning the secrets of chess, is maintained, but in a more accessible way. Any ideas that are mine, and not the author's, are in italics.

This brings us to the highlighting. We use **bold print** to indicate definitions of things (like **outpost**). ***Bold italics*** are used frequently and they are less definitions than advice (like ***a pawn is a dangerous criminal***). *Regular italics* always means this was written by me and not by Nimzovich.

(2) Chess Content

Most pre-computer books have lots of mistakes in the variations. Bobby Fischer's *My Sixty Memorable Games* was considered a paragon of perfection in analysis until something showed up that was several hundred rating points stronger than Bobby. Even Kasparov's *Great Predecessors* books, already written in the computer age, were far from error-free. So it is fine to have mistakes, even serious mistakes in books...

...but not if they are textbooks! The problem is that the student will check the position with the engine, find that the engine says something totally different, and become hopelessly confused about what knowledge to retain. In the modern era, a textbook (and this certainly is one) needs to be free from major errors that jeopardize the narrative.

But inserting a footnote for every error would disrupt the flow of the book. Also, in a book about positional chess, there is a risk of missing the forest of deep chess understanding for the trees of computer variations. Therefore, I decided to treat the errors as follows:

(a) If an error is minor and the correction has no impact on the narrative, it is simply corrected quietly with no explanation. Some of these errors may have been just typos or small miscalculations. They have zero effect on the ideas of that part of the analysis, and only a reader deeply versed in the original *My System* would even notice the difference.

(b) More significant errors that may have a small effect on the narrative, but do not change the conclusions, are corrected quietly in the text, but the appendix at the end of the book lists all these corrections. The corrections are usually explained briefly. This category also includes slight changes in illustrative positions. For example, a pawn might be added somewhere to make the suggested move clearly the best move or to make the position better fit the theme. This is also mentioned in the appendix.

Generally, if I deemed it highly likely that the author would have agreed with the change, I made the change stealthily in the text and noted the difference in the appendix.

(c) Sometimes, the error impacts the evaluation of the position. In the most vexing cases, the entire assessment is wrong, yet the game is still instructive. Here, the error is corrected in *italics*. If you see any *simple (not bold) italic text*, that means that I (Alex Fishbein), and not Aron Nimzovich, wrote it. It is quite possible that Nimzovich would not have written it even if he had had the computer. If the original text is relevant too, it is included. Here, I sometimes provide detailed explanations of why the change was needed. Sometimes these are conceptual corrections, and not just variations. For example, the entire chapter on overprotection has disappeared, but I present this concept in a slightly different form, which is now more accepted (and that, I believe, Nimzovich also intended before getting carried away).

(d) Sometimes a game, an illustration, or (most frequently) opening advice just cannot be salvaged. Then it disappears without mention. *FastTrack* also removes some illustrative examples that I consider superfluous, as well as variations that do not hold up and/or add nothing substantive to the discussion.

Some punctuation of moves (!, ?, etc.) is changed, with no substantive impact. But in positions that I consider especially iconic, I retain Nimzovich's "!!" even when the modern viewpoint might be different. They say, "Plato is my friend, but the truth is dearer to me." I say there are still times when Plato can be dearer than the truth.

The reader should not draw any wrong conclusions from the statement that *My System* had conceptual errors and errors in positional evaluations. As I mentioned, most of Nimzovich's theory holds today. But the game of chess is not bounded by any theory or system. It is critical to understand Nimzovich's ideas, but other ideas are critical too. During the rare times when the author's advice sounded too dogmatic, I softened it. But in more difficult cases, italic text was needed to highlight where the different ideas clash. Understanding those examples will help the reader better apply in practice the concepts of *My System*.

Nimzovich's ideas have stood the test of time and, if anything, are more relevant today. In his famous foreword to the Russian edition from 1974, Mikhail Tal wrote: "This old book, sustaining many editions in different forms and different languages, is imbued with an elixir of eternal chess youth." My aim was to retain that elixir in this new translation.

I now leave this book in the good hands of the reader. I hope that Nimzovich's *My System – FastTrack Edition* will teach you about positional chess, give you many hours of enjoyment, and stimulate your passion for the game.

Alex Fishbein
Spring Hill, TN
February 2024

Chapter 2

The Open File for the Rook

(1) *Introduction*

The open file is a cornerstone of chess strategy. In this chapter, we explain how to attack on an open file, how an **outpost** on the open file can break the opponent's resistance, and how the ultimate goal of operating on the open file is to *occupy the seventh or eighth rank*.

First, let's define what an open file is:
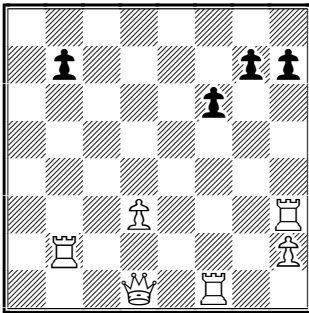
The b-, f-, and h-files are open for the white major pieces, while the d-file is closed. The h-file is only open starting from the h3-square.

A file is open for your rook if you have no pawn on that file (or if there is a pawn, it is hidden behind your rook, as on the h-file above).

Accordingly, to decide whether a file is open or closed, you do not need to take into account whether the opponent has any pieces or pawns on it. In fact, there is no essential difference between playing against a piece (or pawn) on the open file, or against a square on it.

(2) *The creation of the open file by peaceful means, or by violent action. Pawns setting themselves up for attack.*
By definition, to open a file you have to remove your own pawn from it. This can happen by peaceful means if our opponent feels compelled to trade one of our central pieces, and we recapture with a pawn. We stress: a *central* piece! For it threatens our opponent in all directions, which it can rarely do from the side of the board.
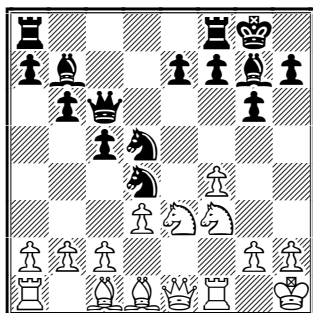
This position is from Thomas-Alekhine, a game which we will see in full later in this chapter. Black has placed his knights in the center, and White finds it necessary to trade them:
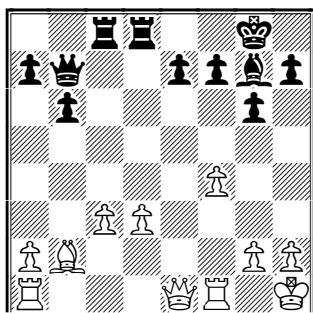
14.♘×d4 c×d4 (we have an open c-file now) **15.♘×d5 ♕×d5 16.♗f3 ♕d7 17.♗×b7 ♕×b7**

The open c-file is already felt. Not seeing a way to safeguard the pawn on c2, White moves it:

18.c4 d×c3

As a result, the d4-pawn is no longer in the way (any pawn can block our own pieces). Now Black will have two open files for his rooks:

19.b×c3 ♖ac8 20.♗b2 ♖fd8

The simultaneous play on the open c- and d-files will be decisive, as we shall see in Game 3.

Therefore, try to post your pieces centrally, as long as they cannot be driven back by a pawn-roller! You can then provoke your opponent into exchanges that open files for you.

As a typical example of the forceful (or violent) opening of a file, let's consider the following beginning of a game:

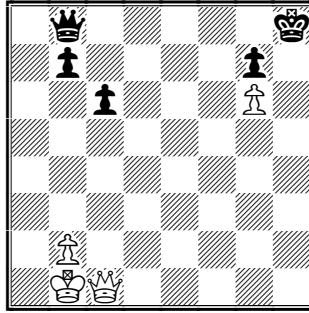**1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗c4 ♗c5 5.d3 d6 6.♗e3 ♗b6 7.♕d2 0–0 8.0–0–0 h6?**
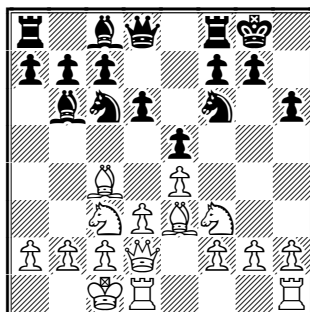
Black h-pawn is the target of attack

Black's last move was a mistake. It allows us to quickly get rid of our own g-pawn and open the g-file. The h6-pawn is the **target of attack**, which we can conduct with h2-h3, g2-g4, and g4-g5. After ...h×g5 we would recapture with a piece, and after ♖h1-g1 we have an open file.
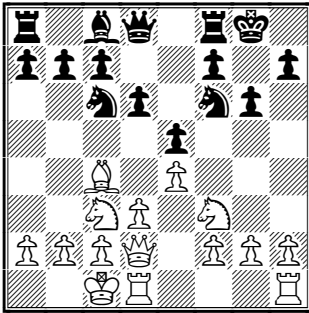
It does not matter that we have a piece on that file, for a piece (unlike a pawn) is no obstacle.

Now imagine, in the above diagram, that the bishops on e3 and b6 are absent, and the g-pawn is on g6 but the h-pawn back on h7.
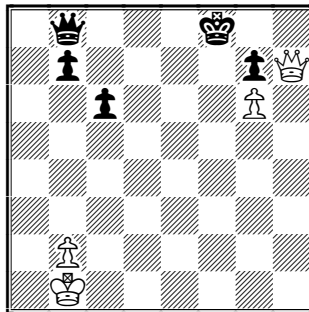

Here the g6-pawn is the target, and we will try to open the h-file (always the one next to the file where the target of attack is). The plan is h2-h4, h4-h5, and h5×g6. We could even trade off the defender of the h5-square, the f6-knight, with ♘c3-d5. Then we do not need to sacrifice anything on h5. As a last resort, our opponent could try to bypass our pawn with g6-g5, but that would be difficult as we have pieces attacking that square.

(3) *The ultimate goal of all operations on the open file is penetration to the seventh or eighth rank and command thereof.*
This is a very important rule. We stress: the infiltration is along the open file (not by some detour from it). Let's see a simple example:

Catastrophe on the h-file

The h-file is open for our major pieces (here, the queen). We can think of it as an arrow that determines the direction of our activity.

1.♕h1+ ♚g8

Now we need to enter on the seventh or eighth rank. The eighth rank is unavailable, so:

2.♕h7+ ♚f8

Now we have the skewer on the eighth rank:

3.♕h8+ ♚e7 4.♕×b8, winning the queen.

This was not accidental: in fact, it is a typical outcome of forceful entry onto the seventh or eighth ranks. If the black queen were on d7 rather than b8, we would finish with 4.♕×g7+, 5.♕×d7+ and 6.g7, which is just as deadly for Black. The triangular motion h7-h8-g7 is a kind of **outflanking**.

To summarize: in the event of insufficient defenses (no pawn on h5 or h6), the attacker, after securing the entry squares (h7 here), gets rewarded for the effort with either a skewer or a chance to outflank the enemy.

In this example, this was clear and easy to understand. In a reality, there will be major obstacles to overcome, as the next section shows.

(4) *The barriers on the open file and how to break them. Fortified and unprotected barriers. Gradual versus radical attack.*

We have seen how decisive the consequences of conquering the seventh and eighth ranks can be. Therefore, it would follow that nature itself has done something to protect this sensitive part of the position, just like Mother Nature has protected the heart behind the ribs.

The pawn is the natural defender of the seventh rank on an open file. The pawn says: "The path to the seventh or eighth rank goes over my dead body!"
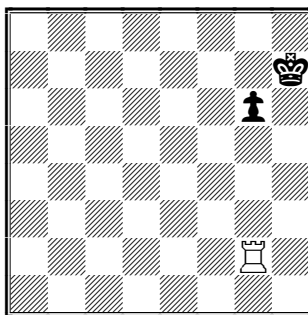
*The g6-pawn is
an unprotected barrier*

If such an enemy pawn were defended by another pawn, it would be like a **block of granite**. It would be senseless to try to smash this fortified barrier by, for example, tripling the heavy pieces on the open file. It would be wiser to first **undermine** the fortification with a pawn; for example, h2-h4-h5 and h5×g6. After the black pawn recaptures, the poor peasant will become vulnerable to attack. The next diagram illustrates this.
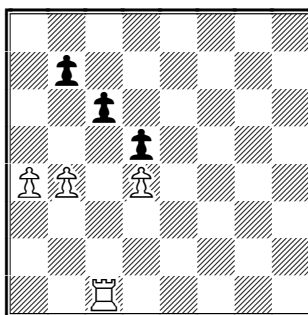

*The c6-pawn is a block of granite,
but not after b4–b5×c6*

As we have mentioned, the pawn is a reliable defender. A defense by a piece is almost a misunderstanding. It is the pawn alone that guards the barrier, doing so solidly, persistently, and without grumbling. Therefore, when we say "protected pawn," we will be referring to a pawn protected by one of its colleagues, another pawn!

In our example above, the g-pawn was not protected in this sense and thus, opposing pieces will gang up on it.

The aim of this attack, of course, is to win this pawn by a build-up of force: first to gain material but then also to break open the file. Technically, we accomplish this by bringing our pieces into attacking positions. There will be a heated battle over the pawn. The opponent will try to defend it with as many pieces as we attack it with. Then we try to eliminate one of the defenders by (a) chasing it away, (b) exchanging it, or (c) blocking it off from the pawn.

Let's see an example of this gradual attack. We could also call it "evolutionary," in contrast to "revolutionary" or radical attack, which we shall see later.
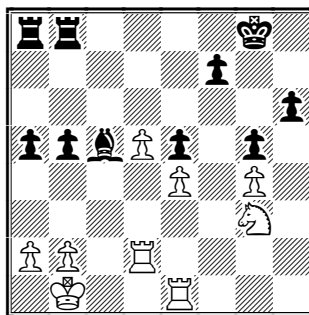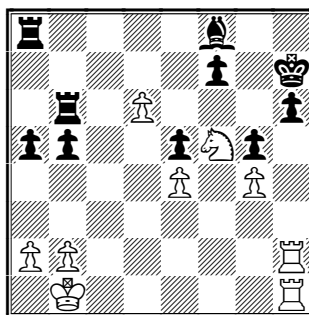

A gradual, focused attack against h6

1.♖h2 ♔h7 2.♖eh1

White is ganging up on the h6-pawn, an unprotected barrier on the file.

2...♗f8 3.♘f5 ♖b6

So far, Black is keeping up: three defenders against three attackers. But with the next move,

4.d6

White cuts the communication line between the defending b6-rook and the h6-pawn, and the pawn falls. If Black had two rooks on the sixth