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## 2 2...♘f6: Main Line with 6 ♖c4

1 e4 c5 2 c3 ♗f6 3 e5 ♘d5 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♗f3

5 ♖xd4 is a radical way of avoiding the cxd4 structure. White's queen is aggressively placed, but his second move is looking rather pointless. Game 9, Deviatkin-Macieja, is a recent and mutually creative game in this line between two good GMs.

5...♗c6 6 ♖c4

Immediately putting the bishop on a dangerous diagonal. Black needs to play accurately in order to neutralize this piece.

6...♗b6

Black can also play 6...e6, when 7 cxd4 d6 transposes to Game 2, Mamedyarov-Ramirez.

7 ♖b3

Now Black can take on c3, but that's extremely risky since the game opens up to White's benefit. Instead, he normally picks one of two alternative plans.

7...g6

This is the most ambitious idea, preparing a kingside fianchetto.

7...d5 is a more reliable equalizing attempt, looking to develop the light-squared bishop and exchange pieces. It has been extensively explored and can be considered a 'safe line'. Game 6, Erenburg-Mikhalevski, is one of the more interesting recent tussles in this line.

After 7...g6:

8 ♗g5 is extremely sharp, immediately attacking the f7-pawn. Game 7, Zhigalko-Khairullin, is an interesting game here between two young talented players.

8 cxd4 is a quieter option which promises good chances of an edge. Game 8, Baklan-Romero, is a model demonstration of White's chances here.

### Game 6

## Sergei Erenburg – Viktor Mikhalevski

*Beersheba 2003*

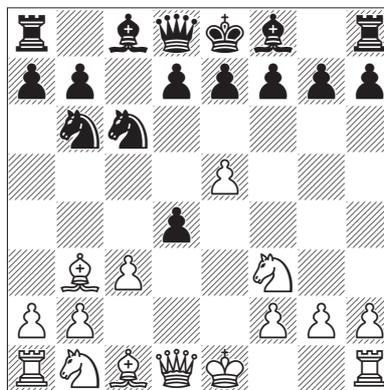
1 e4 c5 2 c3 ♗f6 3 e5 ♘d5 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♗f3  
♗c6 6 ♖c4 ♗b6 7 ♖b3 (D)

This has built up a substantial body of theory, but has never really been shown to lead to anything for White. All of the leading experts in the c3 Sicilian are now focusing their attention elsewhere. Nonetheless, it's an important line to get to grips with.

7...d5

This is the most reliable defence. Black compels the exchange of the e5-pawn and brings his queen's bishop into the game, so that it can neutralize its white counterpart by ...♗e6.

B



Simple kingside development with, say, 7...e6 and 8...♗e7, does nothing to contest White's space advantage, and leaves Black with absolutely no prospects.

I should mention that 7...d6 gives White the option of transposing into the 5 cxd4 d6 6 ♗c4 ♘b6 7 ♗b3!? line, though if White wanted to play this he probably would have adopted the mainstream move-order.

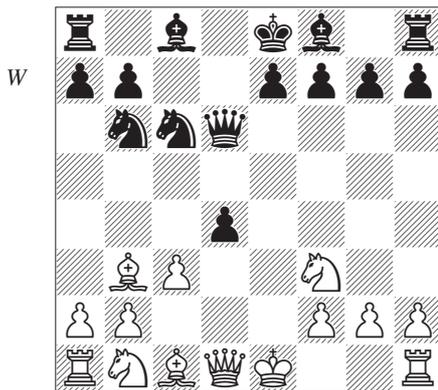
7...dxc3 doesn't necessarily lose on the spot, but it's extremely risky. Black is a long way from completing development and White can use the interim period to generate a substantial initiative. Nunn gives 8 ♘xc3 g6 (8...e6 9 ♗e4 leaves White in full control of the d6-square, which makes the development of the c8-bishop extremely awkward, given that it can't be fianchettoed since the b6-knight stands in the way) 9 0-0 ♗g7 10 ♖e2 0-0 11 ♙d1, concluding that "White has strong pressure. Black can hardly free himself without returning the pawn, but then White's active pieces tend to give him the advantage."

The enterprising 7...g6!? is covered in the next game.

### 8 exd6

If White doesn't take, Black will play ...♗g4 and ...e6, with an excellent version of the French since his bishop is outside the pawn-chain.

### 8...♖xd6 (D)



The standard advice against bringing out one's queen at an early stage is useful one to bear in mind – certainly, in these lines, Black's queen can become a target for the white pieces.

Nonetheless, he has a good developmental idea – ...♗e6!, which will exchange the strong b3-bishop and allow the a8-rook into play. It's quite rare that someone should complete his queenside development while still being three moves away from castling, but practice has established this approach as the most accurate.

### 9 0-0

Bringing the rook into the game and ensuring that the king is not harassed.

9 ♗a3 was one of the main attempts to cause problems for Black here, once it became apparent that the main line is just a draw. Black's best approach is to exploit the fact that ♗xc3 is unavailable by playing 9...dxc3!. White now has a choice – queens on or queens off:

a) 10 ♖e2 ♗f5 11 ♗b5 ♖d7 12 ♗e5 ♗xe5 13 ♖xe5 and now 13...♙c8 was an invention of English GM Peter Wells. White is now struggling to demonstrate enough for the pawn. Capturing on a7 is dubious since Black gains excellent play by taking on b2 and playing ...♗c4.

b) After 10 ♖xd6 exd6 11 ♗b5 we have an extremely difficult queenless middlegame, in which both sides have threats. Rogozenko recommends 11...♙b8 12 bxc3 (12 ♗g5 ♗e5 is fine for Black) 12...♗e7 13 ♗f4 0-0 with equality.

### 9...♗e6 (D)

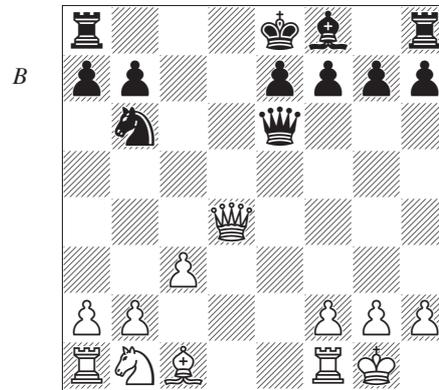
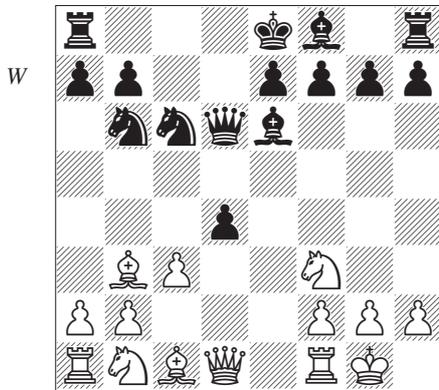
Exchanging off a key white piece. Alternative approaches don't inspire confidence – for instance, the simple 9...e6 leaves Black very passively placed.

9...dxc3 is also a dubious option – White has a substantial endgame initiative after both 10 ♖xd6 exd6 11 ♗xc3 and 10 ♗xc3 ♖xd1 11 ♙xd1. In the former case, the poor black structure is a major factor, while in the latter, White has moves such as ♗d5 and ♗e3 at his disposal.

### 10 ♗xe6

This is White's last major opportunity to deviate from the drawish main line.

Here also 10 ♗a3 has been tried. After 10...dxc3! 11 ♖e2 ♗xb3 12 ♗b5 ♖b8 13 axb3 Black has tried to develop his bishop by two methods: 13...e5 (13...g6!? is more ambitious) 14 bxc3 ♗e7 and now Smagin's 15 ♗g5 could be the most promising. After 15...a6 16 ♗xe7



♘xe7 17 ♘xe5! the knight on b5 is untouchable, and following 17...0-0 (Rogozenko thinks the materialistic 17...f6 is not worth the risk since the black king is exposed to a vicious attack) 18 ♘d4 White might have a slight edge.

#### 10...♖xe6

Black definitely needs some skill or some theoretical knowledge to handle this position, since the development of his f8-bishop is far from straightforward.

#### 11 ♘xd4

11 cxd4 is a strategically dubious decision in my view – without a light-squared bishop White has fewer chances of generating an attack in the resulting IQP position, while Black is closer to a favourable late middlegame/endgame.

#### 11...♘xd4

This is the main move, but activates the white pieces so Black must know what he's doing. 11...♖d7 is a good alternative, which has an additional benefit of being less explored than 11...♘xd4.

#### 12 ♖xd4 (D)

Black's only concern is his development. The pawn-structure is more than OK for him, since his extra central pawn will be extremely useful in any middlegame and most endgames.

#### 12...♗d8 13 ♖h4!

This looks like the only good square for the queen.

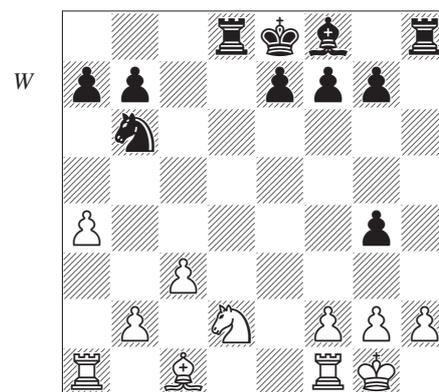
#### 13...♖c6!?

An interesting idea from Mikhalevski, keeping the queen on a safe and strong square while preparing to get his dark-squared bishop out and castle.

13...♖e2 has been the main line for a long time, and looks completely adequate. The line has some emotional significance for me since a win with the black pieces here enabled me to become Irish Champion in 2002. 14 ♘d2 and now:

a) 14...♗xd2 15 ♕xd2 ♖xd2 16 ♗fd1 ♖h6 17 ♖g3 ♖c6 is simply a draw in all lines – as an example, have a look at 18 ♖b8+ ♘c8 19 b4 e6 20 a4 ♕e7 21 b5 ♖c5 22 ♖xb7 0-0 23 a5 ♕f6 24 b6 axb6 25 a6 ♕xc3 26 a7 ♘xa7 with equality, Malaniuk-Azmaiparashvili, Tallinn 1981.

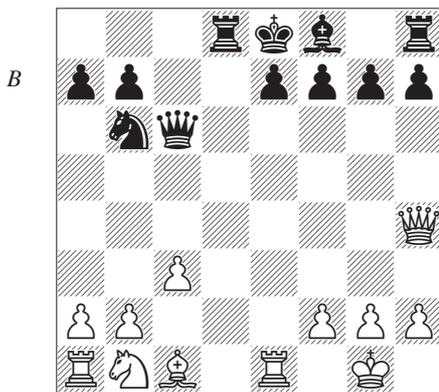
b) 14...h5! is a really nice positional move, trying to exchange queens and bring the h8-rook into play after ...♖g4. 15 a4 (a good move – White had previously played 15 h3 but I think this idea is very logical, since White activates his rook down the a-file) 15...♖g4 16 ♖xg4 hxg4 (D).



I was very happy with this structural change, since the knight is denied the f3-square and the

h2-pawn can easily come under attack. 17 a5 ♖d5 18 ♜a4! (a creative way to bring the rook into play) 18...f5!? (dropping the knight back to f6 is simpler and, perhaps, sounder, but this move is far more ambitious; I got the formation I wanted in the game, though I wasn't so keen on dropping a pawn to achieve it!) 19 ♜e1 g6 20 ♗b3 ♕f7 21 c4 ♗f6 22 ♙e3 e5! (it's not worth trying to hold the queenside) 23 ♙xa7 ♗e4 24 ♜aa1 ♙b4 (all the black pieces are perfectly placed, and I think he has full compensation) 25 ♜ed1 f4 (maybe this is asking too much of the position; 25...♕e6 is a good alternative) 26 ♙b6 ♜xd1+ 27 ♜xd1 ♕e6 28 f3 gxf3 29 gxf3 ♗g5 30 ♕g2?! (30 ♜d3 is sounder, when 30...♜c8 31 c5 ♜h8!? 32 ♕g2 ♕f5 33 ♗c1 doesn't give Black enough compensation) 30...♗xf3 31 ♙c5?? (31 ♕xf3 ♜h3+ 32 ♕e4 ♜xb3 33 ♜d5 still leaves Black struggling) 31...♜xh2+ 32 ♕xf3 ♕f5! (a really satisfying move to play, even if it could be played by a 5-year-old; the threat of mate costs White material) 33 ♗d4+? (33 ♜d5 ♜h3+ 34 ♕f2 ♜xb3 is clearly better for Black, but White had to try this) 33...exd4 34 ♜xd4 ♜f2+! 0-1 Brady-Collins, Irish Ch, Greystones 2002. White loses both his pieces.

14 ♜e1 (D)



Black's basic problem, of course, is the development of his bishop. Once this piece gets into the game, White will have absolutely no advantage – moreover, because Black has an extra central pawn, the middlegame should be more pleasant for him. Extra central pawns

can be used ambitiously (...e5-e4-e3, winning squares and space) or defensively (a pawn on e6 cuts out any attacks along the a2-g8 diagonal). Mikhalevski decides to be bold:

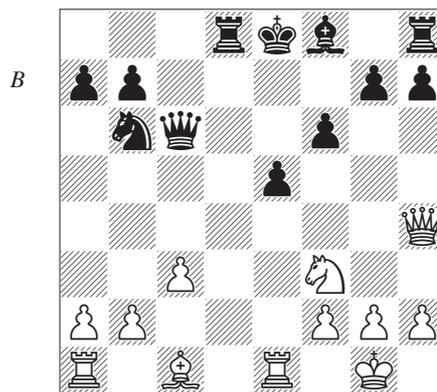
14...f6!?

Mikhalevski's comment on this ambitious move is instructive: "Playing Sergei for the first time several years ago I was thinking about this move in a similar position during the game. That time I decided to play the standard 14...e6. This time I decided to surprise my young opponent. The idea of this move is pretty simple. I want to play ...e5 and then to finish development by means of ...♙e7 and ...0-0. At the same time I have been preventing ♗g5, which is possible after 14...e6."

I've annotated this move as interesting because I have great admiration for any professional player who, despite being aware of a safe equalizing line, decides on a more ambitious continuation. That said, from an objective standpoint Black seems to be asking too much of the position – in numerous lines, after logical play, his position simply splits down the middle.

14...e6 15 ♗g5 ♜d5 (not 15...f6?? 16 ♗xf6!) is the alternative – theory states that Black has a perfectly acceptable position.

15 ♗d2 e5 16 ♗f3 (D)



16...♙e7

Mikhalevski suggests 16...♙c5!? 17 ♜h5+ g6 18 ♜h6 ♜d7 as a good alternative. That may be the case, but it seems like Black is risking a lot for very little potential reward. After something