

Mario Matouš
(16.vi.1947-4.vii.2013)

by Emil Vlasák

(Originally posted as a preview of the obituary which appeared in EG 194, and retained, with the agreement of the editor of EG and of the author, because people have posted links to it. In EG, it is accompanied by some photographs which it was not convenient to reproduce here, plus some further studies.)

Mario Matouš was born in Mladá Boleslav (55 km north-east of Prague) on June 16th 1947 into an intellectual family – both his parents were language teachers. The three-year-old boy's first memories are connected with the arrest of his mother, who was imprisoned by the Communist regime for about two years for purely political reasons. As was the practice at that time, the whole family was persecuted. The father was obliged to take a third-rate manual job and the children spent some time in nurseries. Mario declined to participate in "Pioneer" (the mass communist youth organization) and instead worked actively in the Roman Catholic Church. The communists did not forgive such things, and a well-read boy with an excellent academic record obtained permission only to be trained as a fitter. However, Mario, like most chess players, was not manually skilled and thus had a lifetime problem in finding suitable employment.

Fortunately, Mario had learned chess at the age of nine, and this opened up better prospects. After national service in 1968 he gradually became a master class player. Thanks to his chess contacts he also got a good job. In 1971 Mario won the Central Bohemian championship and as a result played in the Czechoslovak semi-final. Despite the problems with the regime, these were the best years of Mario's life. He liked chess friends around, jokes and a lot of beer. Several funny stories starring Mario are told from this era. His friend IM Petr Špaček recalls:

Young Mario used a bike to travel to tournaments, but once it was stolen. A few months later a bunch of chess players were sitting in a pub and after a lot of beers were consumed somebody remembered the bike. And because a convenient post card was available, they wrote a letter to the communist police: "Comrades police! The anniversary of the Great October Revolution is approaching and I still have not got back the stolen bike..." Of course the bike had not been found, but the writers were all given a three months' suspended sentence. Matouš's interrogation was entertaining: "The accused Mario Matouš, does your father have any property?" "No." "And does your mother have any property?" "No." "The accused Mario Matouš, do you have any property?" Mario thought for a moment and then replied: "I did have a bike!"

Unusually, Mario came to a chess match in a suit. "Where have you been?" the other players asked him. "At a wedding." "And whose wedding?" "My own."

Unfortunately, the marriage quickly fell apart. In 1976 Matouš moved to Prague and his friends GM Eduard Meduna and IM Petr Špaček invited him to play for Tesla Karlín in the 1st Czechoslovak league. In Tesla (a large Czech electronics company) he also had a steady job for many years. In the period 1980-90 Matouš played for TJ Spofa Prague. But chess composition slowly came to dominate and Mario played in over-the-board events only for fun.

Matouš published his first endgame study in 1968, and quickly gained an international reputation. He always needed a lot of beer to get an inspiration. But after getting it, he suddenly changed into an austere and hard-working man. He didn't sleep, drink or eat, and spent many days and nights feverishly working out the idea. Where a normal composer would test one or two versions, Matouš sifted dozens. There were attempts to improve his studies, but usually Mario just laughed. He had almost everything on his "playground" and knew exactly why he went his way.

The second hard-working composer in the former Czechoslovakia was Michal Hlinka, and it is not surprising that there was a certain rivalry between them. Mario said about it: "The difference between Hlinka and Matouš? Yes, Hlinka produced a hundred studies from one idea, while Matouš from a hundred ideas produced one study." Somewhat exaggerated, but pretty accurate.

The results were excellent - precise constructions in a classical and economical style. Matouš's knowledge of foreign work was limited, and from time to time he used less original themes. However, even in such a case the result usually outshone its predecessors and the study was a contribution to the art.

Matouš published almost 300 studies and won more than 160 honours (20 commendations, 50 honorable mentions and 80 Prizes, 20 being First Prizes). He was many times Czechoslovak and Czech champion, and he was a Czech Master of Sport and a FIDE Master.

I met Mario sometime in 1982. He was a composing star of the first magnitude, while I was a novice composer. Still, he was friendly, he didn't look down on me, and he offered to be on first-name terms (a speciality of several Slavonic languages where friends use a different verb form). Even so, it was clear who was the Master and accordingly I so treated him. Unlike his old friends I had not experienced his "bohemian years". He was an authority for me and that is why I judge him more strictly. While being a genius at chess composition, in other matters he was impractical, clueless and perhaps simply lazy. He did not receive the higher titles IM or GM because for some time he ignored the FIDE Albums. Perhaps this was the first indication of future psychiatric problems.

Matouš spent most of his life in Prague with his girlfriend Hana. He hated the communist regime, but ironically he started to get worse after its fall. He again had problems in finding a job and after several attempts found a haven as a night security guard. Even his tournament results in endgame studies dropped off a little. Matouš became a little hackneyed, and he received more honourable mentions than Prizes. However his highest compositional level was maintained until about 2009. Then he became completely overwhelmed by creative depression and Mario stopped publishing altogether.

The calendar said February 2008 and I had just travelled over 100 km from Usti nad Labem to the Prague pub "Na Třemošné" to talk with Mario about our forthcoming book. Although I entered the pub before eleven in the morning, it was already too late to catch the Master sober and again we did not make progress. As usual, the talk turned to Mario's monologue about his inward problems. His idol Bobby Fischer had died a month before. "To die at the age of 64 is an ideal chess player's end," said Mario. "But Fischer got there first, and if I did so as well it would not be original."

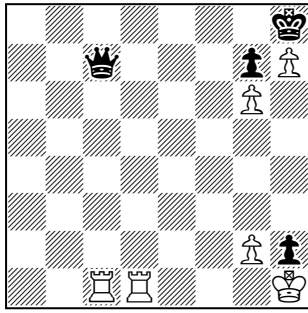
Such a pessimistic mood had unfortunately materialized in Matouš's lifestyle; he still had an incredible beer consumption accompanied by chain smoking. The final blow was Hana's death. Mario died on July 4th 2013 at the age of 66 years in a medical institution, almost alone and destitute.

A Memorial service was held for Mario on July 16th in the Church of St. Roch. It was organized by the Prague Chess Society and paid for by the Czech Chess Association. The speakers were Matouš's sister Ariana, and IM Jaroslav Polášek for chess players and composers. Afterwards we adjourned to Mario's home pub "Na Třemošné".

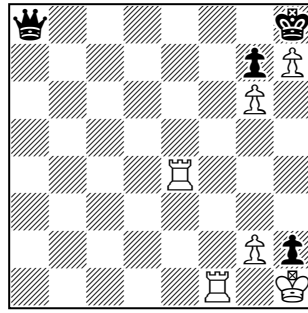
Matouš as a philosopher? Mario was an avid reader and his interests also encompassed philosophical writings; he especially liked Nietzsche. Here are a few ideas from his private correspondence with Michal Hlinka: *What is an artist? That's easy: An artist is a man searching for Beauty. But what's Beauty? This is hard to answer. I know „artists“ with worn-out theses like: „Beauty is relative. Beauty resides in the possibility of looking into my soul.“ Then such an „artist“ demonstrates his work in an art gallery – a concrete cube with two carelessly fixed scaffolding-pipes. Title: „Untitled“ and price: US\$ 1000. Bearded critics full of admiration nod their heads, but normal people spit and hurry away. Well, it's impossible to measure, weigh or prove the existence of Beauty. But I hope there is still a rich aesthetic feeling in ordinary man. Just in this I see a chance for a real artist to approach absolute Beauty.*

One of the great features of Mario's work was a continued link with practical chess. Whenever Mario arrived on the scene, he forced players to solve his new studies. Therefore several players sought him out, while others for the same reason avoided him.

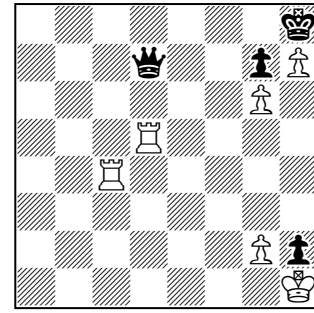
I especially like Matouš's study 1 [overleaf] from the Duras MT. It is perhaps a study for playing through rather than for solving, but a pleasant evening can be spent analyzing it.



1 - White to play and win



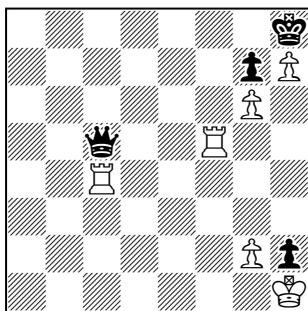
1a - a target for White (Black to play)



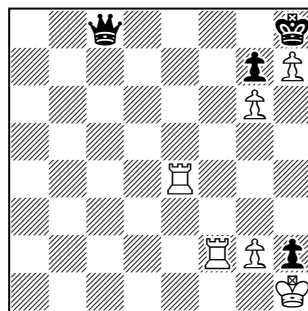
1b - after 2 Rd5

Black must defend his back rank, but can hope to sacrifice for stalemate. For example, if 1 Ra1 then 1...Qa5 threatening 2...Qxa1 and 2...Qe1+, and stalemate will soon follow. White's strategy in reply hinges on position **1a**, where the rook on e4 prevents ...Qxg2+ and Black to play soon loses (we'll see the details later), and to reach **1a** it turns out that he may first have to transfer the rooks to e1 and f1. To achieve this, he has to make several "only" moves.

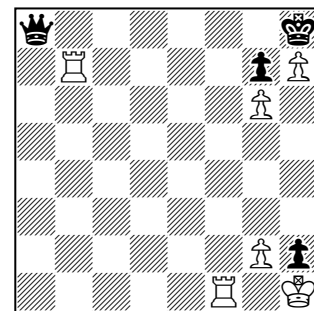
So try say 1 Rc3: no, 1...Qd7, and in due course it is found that White gets nowhere. Correct is **1 Rc4**, and if 1...Qb8 to guard d8 then 2 Rf1 Qa8 3 Re4 and already we have **1a**. More challenging is **1...Qd7**, and now if 2 Rf1 then 2...Qf5. The move is **2 Rd5** giving **1b**, and if 2...Qe8 then 3 Re4 Qa8 (3...Qxg6 4 Rd8+ Kxh7 5 Rh4+) 4 Re1 (with the rook on d5 also blocking the diagonal a8-g2, White can move that on e4) Qf8 5 Rf5 Qa8 6 Rf3 (this position will recur in the main line) Qb8 7 Rff1 (rooks duly transferred to e1/f1) Qa8 8 Re4 and again we have **1a**. But Black also has **2...Qc7**, to which the answer is **3 Rf5** (if 3 Re5 then 3...Qb8 and again White gets nowhere). Now if 3...Qb8 then 4 Rf1 Qa8 5 Re4 yet again giving **1a**, hence **3...Qc5** giving **1c** below.



1c - after 3...Qc5



1d - after 5...Qc8



1e - after 11 Rb7

Here, White must play **4 Rf2** to prevent ...Qg1#, and after **4...Qf5** he must play **5 Re4** to prevent ...Qb1+ (if instead 5 Rc1/Rc2 then 5...Qxg6). There follows **5...Qc8** (see **1d**) **6 Re1** (not 6 Rf1, when 6...Qa8 gives **1a** with White to play and there is no win) **Qa8 7 Rf3 Qb8 8 Rff1**. The rooks have been transferred to e1/f1, and the rest is relatively easy: **8...Qa8 9 Re4** (**1a** at last) **Qb8 10 Re7 Qa8 11 Rb7** (see **1e**) **Qe8 12 Rbf7** and wins.

A sad end to a magnificently productive life, but Mario was far from being the first and he will certainly not be the last. Sustained and intense mental effort can be remarkably draining, both physically and psychologically, and those of us who work in less demanding fields can only marvel at the labour which must have gone into the creation of a study like that above: not just in analysing the solution and verifying that neither side could benefit by varying from it, but in doing the same with the numerous alternative settings which must have been considered along the way. All this was in 1982, before computers were available to help (and even after they came on the scene, Mario was one of the composers who preferred not to use them). For a fuller analysis of this superb study, see Emil's book Matouš under the microscope, which I had the pleasure of distributing with the December 1998 issue of British Endgame Study News.

I myself met Mario only once, when I stopped off in Prague on my way back from a visit to my daughter's husband's family in southern Moravia. He was demonstrating some of his latest studies, and the men were whizzing to and fro across the board far more quickly than I could hope to comprehend. He was also one of a small group who came to see me off at the station, and I remember him waving from the platform as the train pulled out, beer bottle raised in salute. - JDB