

11. National Master Andrew Sacks Speaks about the Herman Steiner Chess Club

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National Master Andrew Sacks was involved with both the Piatigorsky Foundation and the Steiner Chess Club as a player, writer, and helper. Mr. Sacks served as one of the wall-boys for the 1963 Piatigorsky Cup while in his teens, and has written several articles about his experiences at this event and the Steiner Chess Club at www.chessdryad.com.

John Donaldson: When did you first join the Steiner Chess Club?

National Master Andrew Sacks: I first joined the Steiner Chess Club in 1961, when I was thirteen years old. It was then located on Beverly Boulevard in West Hollywood.

JD: Do you remember what it was like when you went into the Club? What was it - do you have any recollections of what it was like in the building itself?

AS: Yes, definitely. It was a converted apartment. You know the term duplex, well it was a fourplex - two apartment units downstairs, two apartment units upstairs. And the one on the west side upstairs was converted into the Herman Steiner Chess Club.

JD: And was this Mrs. Piatigorsky's doing, that they got this space?

AS: Very good question. The Steiner Club had had two or three locations before that. I don't know how it happened that that location was secured. I don't know that.

JD: And was that location used for example, for any of the [Bobby] Fischer - [Samuel] Reshevsky match games?

AS: No, it wasn't. You see, because it was a relatively large apartment with various rooms, it was certainly not capable of housing either a tournament that had eighty or a hundred players or comfortably a high-level tournament. So that's why also in 1961, coincidentally the year that I first got there, they opened the Cashio Street larger venue, and that's where the games from the Fischer - Reshevsky match were held.

JD: If I understand correctly, getting that property was Mrs. P's doing.

AS: Oh, totally. It was designed, yes. Lloyd Wright, that is, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr.'s son, also a noted architect, was commissioned by the Piatigorskys to design that Cashio Street location.

JD: And what was that Club like, I mean, in terms of rough square footage, how would you describe it approximately?

AS: The Cashio Street, very interesting design of the interior of the building. It went, you walked in, there was a very large room, however it was relatively narrow, but long and it was slanted so

one walked up slightly as one walked to the back, where there was a sliding glass door and a patio. That patio was designed for - I don't know if it was designed for anything else - but during the games of the Fischer - Reshevsky match in L.A. and I was present at one of them, that's where Irving Rivise and others set up to do their analysis, that outside room, that patio.

JD: Well, it was good that they played that match in the summer. If they had done it in the winter, it may not have been an ideal space for—

AS: Right, and it was a covered patio, outside.

JD: So, in the main club property interior, it had room for maybe about a hundred people, would you say?

AS: Which property, the original?

JD: The one on Cashio.

AS: The one on Cashio could certainly hold a tournament with a hundred people. One hundred players, certainly. And I think that was the main impetus in opening it, because the Cashio Street location was much more suited to a large tournament. It was virtually impossible to have a large tournament at the Beverly Boulevard location. Now, by the way, when the Cashio Street location opened, the other location on Beverly Boulevard still continued and that was open for at least several years afterwards as well.

JD: So was it a situation where the Beverly one was used for sort of day-to-day activities and the one on Cashio was for special events?

AS: That is exactly correct.

JD: So the Fischer - Reshevsky match, that was sort of the christening of the club on Cashio.

AS: Definitely.

JD: And then, probably the second big event was the '62 U.S. Championship Playoff for the Interzonal spot between Reshevsky and [William] Addison.

AS: That is also true. The only thing I do not recall was, in '62, they also held the California Junior Championship there in which I played. The only question is which one preceded? In other words, was the Cal. Junior second or was the Playoffs second? But those were the first three major events held at Cashio Street, right.

JD: Now, talking more about the club. What was Mrs. P's involvement? Was it on a day-to-day basis or was it more—

AS: Yes, her involvement was surprisingly active. She was a figure one saw there weekly. I mean, it would have been very rare to go two or three weeks at the Beverly Boulevard location without seeing Mrs. P. there. She was actively involved.

JD: Now was she there primarily as a player or was she there as an administrator, or a little bit of both?

AS: Well, it was a little bit of both. I would say it was primarily as administrator. She had a gentleman chess player named Nathan Robinson who was a class player, who was managing the Beverly Boulevard club, but she was there. She was active. She was advising him. She was a presence always at Beverly Boulevard.

JD: Was George Goehler by any chance, involved with that club, or was that at a prior location?

AS: Exactly, that is a very interesting question. That gentleman I met later. I met him at the first [Piatigorsky] Cup tournament. No, he was not a visible presence at Beverly Boulevard, although all the word is that he had been at previous location or two.

JD: Were you present at any of the [Bobby] Fischer – [Samuel] Reshevsky match games?

AS: One of them.

JD: What sort of turnout did they generate?

AS: Very good turnout, it was practically full. I don't remember which match game it was that I attended. It was a drawn game. In the patio area, there were figures like Carl Pilnick, Irving Rivise, [and] Jack Moskowitz doing the analysis. It was very crowded. It was very full.

JD: And, moving on a little bit, now moving to '63, we come to the first Piatigorsky Cup, and if I'm correct, you served as a wall-boy there.

AS: Correct.

JD: It seems like Mrs. P. attended to every single detail. Is it really true that she bought all of you suits for the event?

AS: Yep, we wore blazers. She furnished us with our attire. She invited us to her house. Gregor played the cello. I cannot tell you how down to earth and friendly both of the Piatigorskys were to the junior players. Not only furnishing us with the professional attire, inviting us over to the house before the tournament started. She was so active in the first Cup doing tasks that from the outside one would think were too menial. Why would a millionairess, a Rothschild do such a thing? We had to arrive early, at least an hour before the games started. She was always there already. One time we saw her borrow from one of their janitorial staff a hand-vacuum, and Mrs.

Piatigorsky, who didn't think the janitorial staff had done quite as good a job as they should have, literally took a hand-vacuum and did some work to make things just perfect. Remarkable!

JD: Yeah, it really is remarkable. You wouldn't hear of too many patrons using a vacuum cleaner to touch everything up.

AS: Incredible! It was like nothing was beyond her. She wanted everything to be perfect, and if it took her to do it, she would simply do it. Unbelievable, but true.

JD: Now during the rounds as a wall-boy, what were your responsibilities?

AS: There was not the electronic assistance they had at the second Cup. Our responsibilities were to (each one of us was assigned to a board) write down all the moves and then at the big demonstration board behind us, make that move.

JD: Were there clocks that showed the spectators the time that had elapsed for each player?

AS: No, not at the first one. Not at the first Cup. There was electronic advancement in ways like that at the second Cup.

JD: So the spectators for the first one, they just had to observe the clock that was on the stage, and gauge the time from that.

AS: Right, if they could see it, but they did see the games progressing on large wall boards, demonstration boards.

JD: Now what was the mechanism to get the moves from those wall boards and from the playing hall to the commentary room?

AS: That was done by one or two of the wall-boys. There was something. I'd have to check. There were more wall-boys than there were games in progress because there were something like ten to twelve wall-boys; however, there were eight players, so only four games at a time. Therefore, each round, several were assigned to duties such as that.

JD: And my impression is, looking at the list of the names of some of the people I had heard of, the wall-boys, it was some of the stronger juniors who were members of the Steiner Chess Club.

AS: Correct. That's absolutely correct.

JD: Now during the course of the tournament, you were sitting there as a wall-boy and you were observing the games. Did you happen to see any interesting situations develop that you might recall and share with us?

AS: Oh, definitely. One day, I think it might have been a weekend day, like a Saturday, maybe a Sunday, again we had to get there early, and my parents would drop me off. I mean these wall-boys, almost all of them, well I shouldn't say almost all, many of them could not drive yet. I was fifteen years old. My parents would drop me off a couple of hours early. One weekend day we saw [Miguel] Najdorf playing speed chess with [Tigran] Petrosian before the game, and [Paul] Keres was there, in a very jovial manner and after the game, their fingers are flying around the board without the pieces, showing, "If this, then this. If this, then that." And we were just, you know, dumbfounded, because of course, they could play blindfold chess, and of course we might have been strong junior players of 1800- or 1900 strength, but it was remarkable to us. That was one of the most memorable anecdotes, seeing Najdorf play a couple of five-minute games with Petrosian. And everyone, all of those players, was in the best possible mood. They were friendly to one another. They were happy. They were jovial.

JD: Now, you as a wall-boy, did you any contact with any of the players? Did they ever ask you for anything, or did they acknowledge your presence in some fashion?

AS: They didn't acknowledge our presence in too many fashions, but after the tournament, there was a gathering both of the wall-boys and the players at the Piatigorskys' house on Bundy Drive, and then there was a little bit of interplay if the kids had the nerve, you understand, to approach them, as some of us did, and we got their autographs and all of that. That was the main interplay. Oh! I can provide another anecdote. Samuel Reshevsky was playing. Samuel Reshevsky was an Orthodox Jew. There was a particular Saturday when he needed several young boys to help him participate in a ritual that he performed just before sundown. I was one of those boys who went there, because - I forget the exact term that Orthodox Jews have for that - there has to be a certain number present, a certain number of Jewish pres—

JD: A minyan perhaps.

AS: A minyan! Exactly. A minyan. And there has to be a certain number of Jewish boys present. And I was one who was at that relatively brief, but highly serious ceremony. That was very interesting. The man took his religion as seriously as anyone could take any religion.